

Cardinal found guilty of child sex crimes

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MELBOURNE: Vatican treasurer Cardinal George Pell has been found guilty on five charges of child sexual abuse committed more than two decades ago against 13-year-old boys in Australia – the most senior Catholic cleric to be convicted of child sex offences.

The guilty verdict was made public yesterday following the lifting of a court suppression order on Pell's 2018 trial, after a second abuse case against him was dropped by the prosecution.

The downfall of the Vatican's No. 3 official brings to the heart of the papal administration a scandal over clerical abuse that has ravaged the church's credibility in the United States, Chile, Australia and elsewhere over the last three decades.

A jury in the County Court of Victoria in Melbourne found Pell guilty on Dec 11 last year following a four-week trial.

He was convicted of five sexual offences committed against the 13-year-old choir boys 22 years earlier in the priests' sacristy of St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne, where Pell was archbishop. One of the two victims died in 2014.

Each of the five offences carries a maximum 10 years in jail.

Pell's lawyers have filed an appeal against the verdict on three grounds, which if successful could lead to a retrial.

"Cardinal Pell has always maintained his innocence and continues to do so," Pell's lawyer Paul Galbally said outside the court.

Pell, who remains on bail, left the court yesterday without speaking to reporters, who virtually mobbed him as he walked from the court-



Convicted: Pell leaving the County Court in Melbourne, Australia. — AP

house steps to a waiting car.

A child abuse survivor who identified himself as Michael Advocate, as his real name is suppressed under Australian law, shouted to Pell: "Burn in Hell".

Pell is due to return to court today for the start of his sentencing hearing.

Pope Francis ended a conference on sexual abuse on Sunday, calling for an "all out battle" against a crime that should be "erased from the face of the earth".

The Vatican said in December that Francis had removed Pell, 77, from his group of close advisers,

without commenting on the trial.

Pell, who took indefinite leave in 2016 from his role as economy minister for the Vatican to fight the charges, was not called to the stand in the trial.

Instead, the jury was shown in open court a video recording of an interview Australian police held with Pell in Rome in October 2016, in which he strenuously denied the allegations.

The jury was also shown a video recording of the surviving victim's testimony behind closed doors.

The testimony was later outlined in open court by the prosecution.

The man, who was a school boy when abused, described how Pell had exposed himself to the two boys, fondled their genitals and masturbated and forced one boy to perform a sex act on him.

"Like many survivors I have experienced shame, loneliness, depression and struggle. Like many survivors it has taken me years to understand the impact upon my life," Pell's victim said through his solicitor Vivian Waller.

"The process has been stressful and it is not over yet. I need space and time to cope with the ongoing criminal process." — Reuters