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Sex-abuse allegations force Pell to stand aside

By Martin Daly, Steve Waldon

August 21 2002

Australia's most powerful religious leader, George Pell, yesterday stood aside as Catholic Archbishop of Sydney to allow an investigation into claims that he sexually abused an altar boy more than 40 years ago.

Dr Pell has been accused of abusing a 12-year-old boy at a church camp at Phillip Island during his time as a trainee priest.

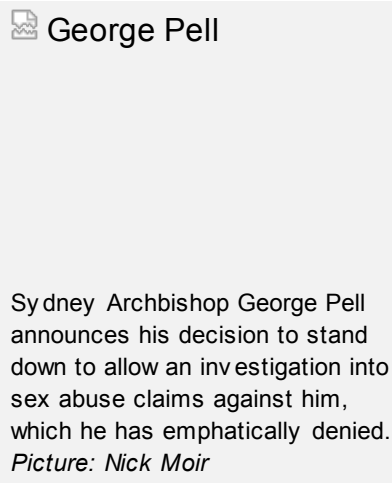
Dr Pell, the former archbishop of Melbourne, has strenuously denied the claims.

"The allegations against me are lies and I deny them totally and utterly," Dr Pell said in a statement yesterday. "The alleged events never happened. I repeat, emphatically, that the allegations are false."

Church and political leaders last night rallied behind Dr Pell. Prime Minister John Howard telephoned the archbishop to offer his support, and later publicly stated that he believed Dr Pell was innocent.

Dr Pell, 61, stood aside a day after he received inquiries from *The Age* about allegations made by a Melbourne man to the church's National Committee for Professional Standards. The committee examines abuse claims under the church's "Towards Healing" process.

Sources last night told *The Age* that Dr Pell's accuser had a long criminal history. He had been convicted of various offences including drug trafficking.



George Pell

Sydney Archbishop George Pell announces his decision to stand down to allow an investigation into sex abuse claims against him, which he has emphatically denied.
Picture: Nick Moir

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A retired judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria, Alec Southwell, QC, will adjudicate on the complaint and report to an independent inquiry set up by the Archbishop of Adelaide, Philip Wilson.

Dr Pell pledged to cooperate with the inquiry "in every possible way - frankly, openly and unreservedly". He said that for the good of the church and to preserve the dignity of his office, he would take leave as Archbishop of Sydney until the inquiry was completed.

The church's standards committee had, before yesterday's announcement, moved to investigate the complaint outside "Towards Healing" because that process does not have the power to investigate a bishop.

Dr Pell's accuser has given a statement to the committee saying that he was molested by a trainee priest at a Phillip Island camp in about 1961.

He claims he did not know the trainee priest had become a church leader until he saw on television a man in long purple robes referred to as Archbishop George Pell. He says he recognised him as "Big George" from the boys camp.

The man's statement claims another boy had started a bushfire during the camp in an act of revenge after being sexually assaulted. The other boy had spoken openly in later years about alleged abuse by "Big George".

The alleged victim went to Broken Rites, an organisation that represents abuse victims, after seeing Dr Pell on television. He also confided in a priest friend who advised him to take action through "Towards Healing".

Dr Pell's accuser rejected repeated advice from standards committee chairman Bishop Geoffrey Robinson of Sydney, and Sister Angela Ryan of Melbourne, to take the matter to the police.

A standards committee document, seen by *The Age*, quotes the man as claiming he had been "subjected to molestation/indecent assault" on many occasions by a man known to them as "Big George". The document says: "Big George told the boys he had played in the ruck for Richmond."

The document also quotes the alleged victim as saying "Big George" would put his hands down his trousers and touch him until he pulled away. "He would grab my hand when he could and would put my hand down his trousers," the statement says.

"This would happen at play, in the water and on any occasion that it was possible. He was very skilful at grabbing me and forcing his hand down or grabbing my hand and forcing it down his pants.

"Especially when we were in our tents, Big George would come into the tents and start wrestling and having pillow fights and would grab me and thrust his hand down my pyjama pants . . .

"In the dark we used to play games with torches where we would go off into the dark, Big George would grab me from behind and molest me.

"Big George would grab me on my own during the day if he had a chance."

The alleged victim also claims in the statement that he saw "Big George" molest his friend at the camp "by putting his hand down (his) pants the way he put his hand down mine . . ."

In his statement yesterday, Dr Pell said he was determined to refute the allegations. He welcomed the inquiry "and a chance to clear my name, recognising that I am not above civil and church law".

He said he had taken a leading role in condemning and exposing sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Australia and, six years ago in Melbourne, had set up Australia's first independent commission to inquire into sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy. "To allege that I am now personally implicated in this evil is a smear of the most vindictive kind," he said.

Under the process set up under Dr Pell in Melbourne six years ago, claims were heard by Queen's counsel Peter O'Callaghan, in a process called the Independent Commission into Sexual Abuse. Victims were offered free counselling and compensation up to \$50,000, later \$55,000.

The Melbourne system was in place some months before "Towards Healing", the church's national response. Dr Pell was criticised for responding separately.

The hierarchy of the Sydney archdiocese will meet today to discuss who will assume leadership during Dr Pell's absence.

Dr Pell will go to Melbourne to be examined by Mr Southwell. He will be allowed legal representation. Standards committee co-chairman Brother Michael Hill said the "process will begin as soon as possible. The investigation will be conducted by Mr Southwell as he sees fit".

Mr Southwell will also examine the complainant, whom the standards committee said "must remain anonymous".

The Prime Minister, after speaking to Dr Pell by telephone last night, told reporters: "I believe completely George Pell's denial.

"You're dealing here with allegations. Common decency and justice requires that they be regarded as allegations. They are going to be investigated, the man has stood aside, the church is doing the right thing, I can't say any more."

Melbourne Catholic Archbishop Denis Hart last night offered Dr Pell his full support. "Archbishop Pell has my total support in the face of accusations made against him," Archbishop Hart said in a brief written statement.

"Justice will now be best served by a speedy completion of the process of inquiry by Mr Alec Southwell, QC."

The Archbishop of Brisbane, John Bathersby, said Dr Pell was a man of great integrity and immense courage and he would "most certainly" stand by him, confident that all the allegations would prove unfounded. "I would expect a positive judgment in his favour. I believe the ultimate result from the investigation will affirm his innocence," he said. "It would be nice for him to know tonight there a lot of people praying and a lot of people standing behind him."

Archbishop Bathersby said he was very surprised when he first heard about the allegations last night.

"At the same time, in the present climate, it is somewhat understandable this has come about with many allegations against the church and church figures," he said.

Welfare groups called for caution and due process. Joe Pucci, chief executive of Australians Against Child Abuse, said he was pleased the church had instituted what seemed to be a transparent process. "I think that it is the right thing that any allegation is taken seriously by an institute like the church even if it is vigorously defended."

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