

Philly archbishop clears 3 priests, removes 5 others

by [David Gibson](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput announced Friday (May 4) that five priests accused of sexually abusing children last year would be barred from ministry and could be defrocked, while three others were cleared by a church-led investigation and could return to pastoral work.

The eight were among more than two dozen priests who were suspended from ministry as a result of accusations made in a scathing February 2011 grand jury report on the sexual abuse of minors by clergy in the archdiocese.

One of the 27 suspended priests is Monsignor William J. Lynn, who was not accused of direct abuse but of covering up for clergy molesters while overseeing personnel matters for the archdiocese from 1992 to 2004. Lynn is currently on trial in Philadelphia on charges of child endangerment, the only church official ever to go before a jury for allowing abusers to prey on minors.

The district attorney is still reviewing six of the cases for possible criminal referral. But the statute of limitations on most of the accusations has expired, leaving law enforcement with little power to sanction any alleged abusers.

The archdiocese set up a blue-ribbon investigative panel to determine which of the priests was guilty of a credible accusation. Punishments would be levied under the church's canon law and could range from defrocking, or "laicization," to an order to live a life of prayer and penance under supervision and away from children. The five priests named Friday by Chaput can also appeal their removal to the Vatican.

One of the 27 accused priests died before a determination of his guilt could be made; the fate of the remaining accused priests is still awaiting a decision by an archdiocesan review board. Chaput said that decision would come in a "matter of weeks."

"I've been in Philadelphia for less than a year, and I've tried as quickly as possible to understand all of the many issues facing our local church," said Chaput, who was transferred from Denver to succeed Cardinal Justin Rigali, who was tainted by the grand jury findings that church officials ignored "credible" allegations of sexual misconduct by priests.

"During that time, dealing with sexual abuse and protecting children has been -- and will remain -- a top priority for me and for this archdiocese," Chaput said. "Our actions, including these outcomes and the steps we have taken to improve our policies and procedures, show that we have learned from the past. No lesson from the sexual abuse scandal is more important than the understanding that the people who suffer most are the victims."

Victims advocates were unconvinced. Barbara Blaine, head of SNAP, the leading advocacy group for victims of clergy sexual abuse, said she was "shocked" that only eight cases had been resolved after more than a year.

"Parishioners and the public should continue to be highly skeptical of these secretive internal church processes and redouble their efforts to get victims and witness to contact police and prosecutors," she said.

Terence McKiernan, head of BishopAccountability.org, a lay-led church reform group, said Chaput "missed a crucial opportunity" because he "could have made Philadelphia the bellwether for nationwide reform of a system that has never delivered on its promise. He has not done so."