



Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome tries to play a didgeridoo during a World Youth Day 2008 media event in Sydney, Australia, on April 17, 2008. The Vatican is considering the findings of a church investigation into “very serious and deeply distressing” child sexual abuse allegations against former Australian Bishop Saunders, a church leader said on Tuesday, Sept. 19, 2023. (AP Photo/Rob Griffith, File)

Rod McGuirk

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CANBERRA, Australia — September 20, 2023

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The Vatican is considering the findings of a church investigation into "very serious and deeply distressing" child sexual abuse allegations against a former Australian bishop, a church leader said on August 19.

Christopher Saunders, now 73, resigned in 2021 as bishop of Broome, an Outback diocese of northwest Australia larger than France but with a population of only 50,000, after police announced they had dropped a sex crime investigation. He had stood down a year earlier after media reported the allegations.

The church investigation into Saunders began last year after the police investigation ended, said Perth Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the church's most senior national leadership group.

A report of the investigation, overseen by Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge, had been sent to the Vatican where the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith was continuing to investigate, Costelloe said.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is the Vatican office that processes cases of clergy abuse of minors, according to the church's in-house canon law.

"Bishop Saunders, who has maintained his innocence, is able to respond to the report by communicating directly with the Holy See," Costelloe said in a statement.

"In due time, the Holy See will make its determination. It is hoped that this will not be unduly delayed," Costelloe added.

Costelloe issued the statement after Australia's Seven Network television news reported late Sept. 18 the contents of the 200-page Vatican report.

The report found Saunders likely sexually assaulted four Indigenous youths and potentially groomed another 67 Indigenous youths and men, Seven reported.

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Costelloe declined to comment on specific allegations.

"The allegations against the former Bishop of Broome, Christopher Saunders, broadcast on Monday evening are very serious and deeply distressing, especially for those making the allegations," Costelloe said. "It is right and proper for them to be thoroughly investigated."

The Western Australia Police Force said they had requested a copy of the Vatican report.

"If further information comes to light, police will investigate," a police statement said.

Police had conducted two investigations into allegations against Saunders between 2018 and 2020. Prosecutors said there was insufficient evidence to lay charges, police said.

Saunders is now Australia's most senior cleric accused of child abuse in a scandal that has enveloped the church around the world.

Cardinal George Pell was the third highest-ranking cleric in the Vatican when he was convicted in an Australian court in 2018 of sexually abusing two 13-year-old choirboys in a Melbourne cathedral in 1996, when Pell was an archbishop.

Pell spent 13 months in prison before the convictions were overturned on appeal. He maintained his innocence until his death in Rome in January.

Saunders began working in Broome as a deacon in 1975 and became bishop in 1996.