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In this Sept. 19, 1988 file photo, Rev. Joseph Hart dispenses communion during an outdoor Mass celebrated for participants of the Basque Festival in Buffalo, Wyo. Hart, cleared by the Vatican of multiple allegations he sexually abused minors and teenagers, after a review board under his diocese in Wyoming found that allegations against him were credible, has died, Wednesday, Aug. 23, 2023 according to the Diocese of Cheyenne. He was 91. (AP Photo/Dean Wariner,File)

by Associated Press

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Cheyenne, Wyo. — August 25, 2023

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A former U.S. bishop cleared by the Vatican of multiple allegations he sexually abused minors and teenagers, after a review board under his diocese in Wyoming found that allegations against him were credible, has died.

Retired Wyoming Bishop Joseph Hart, of Cheyenne, died August 23, according to the Diocese of Cheyenne. He was 91.

Hart long maintained his innocence, denying all allegations of misconduct. In 2021, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cleared him of seven accusations of abuse and determined that five others couldn't be proven with certainty.

Two other cases involving boys who were 16 and 17 couldn't be prosecuted because the Catholic Church didn't consider them minors at the time of the alleged abuse. The Vatican decree didn't address another alleged victim.

Hart's attorney, Thomas Jubin, at the time called some of the allegations "specious," based on second- and third-hand information and some accusers emphasizing that Hart didn't physically touch them.

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But the Vatican findings disappointed Hart's successor, Wyoming Bishop Steven Biegler, who pointed out that they didn't mean Hart was innocent, only that a high burden of proof hadn't been met.

Biegler stood by the findings of a diocese review board appointed after he became bishop that determined six claims were credible. The board included a judge who, as a prosecutor, pursued criminal cases of child sexual abuse.

Hart was a priest in Kansas City, Missouri, for 20 years before moving to Wyoming, where he served as auxiliary and then full bishop from 1976 until his retirement in 2001.

The first known allegations against Hart dated to the early 1960s and were made in the late 1980s. At least six men have come forward in the past several years to say Hart abused them in Wyoming.

Hart's previous diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph reached court settlements years ago with at least 10 victims. Prosecutors in Wyoming decided in 2020 not to proceed with charging Hart.