



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 Saunders, a church leader said on Tuesday, Sept. 19, 2023. (AP Photo/Rob Griffith, File)

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The Vatican had shared with police findings of an internal investigation of a former Australian bishop over child sex abuse allegations and the church would fully cooperate with criminal investigators, a cleric said on Sept. 22.

The Catholic Church announced the handover of its investigation report into former Bishop Christopher Saunders three days after the Western Australia Police Force publicly revealed it had requested a copy.

"The church will continue to offer full transparency and cooperation with W.A. Police," Bishop Michael Morrissey, who replaced Saunders in the Broome Diocese in 2021, said in a statement.

"The church encourages anyone who has experienced abuse, or suspects abuse within the community, to come forward and report it to police," Morrissey added.

Saunders, now 73, denied any wrongdoing and refused to participate in the Vatican investigation, which began last year, the church said.

He 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 Vatican this week confirmed it had completed its Saunders investigation that it said could not have begun before the police investigation had ended.

The confirmation followed media reports on Sept. 18 that the 200-page Vatican report found Saunders likely sexually assaulted four Indigenous youths and potentially groomed another 67 Indigenous youths and men.

The church refuses to publicly detail the allegations that were investigated.

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

charges.

In requesting the Vatican report, a police statement said on Sept. 19: "If further information comes to light, police will investigate."

Morrissey said the Vatican report had been handed to Western Australia Deputy Police Commissioner Allan Adams. Morrissey did not say when.

The church and police "remain in ongoing and collaborative contact on the matter," Morrissey said.

Police on Sept. 22 declined to comment on what they intended to do with the report.

Saunders, who continues to hold the church title of bishop, is now Australia's most senior cleric known to be 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.