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Archbishop denies child-sex allegations

By Philip Cornford, Martin Daly and Lisa Pryor
 August 21 2002

The Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Dr George Pell, stood aside last night, emphatically denying allegations that he sexually assaulted a 12-year-old boy 40 years ago.

"The allegations against me are lies and I deny them totally and utterly," said Dr Pell, before his dramatic announcement that he would stand aside and co-operate "frankly, openly and unreservedly" with an independent inquiry called by the church.

Dr Pell, the most powerful religious leader in Australia, is accused of sexually abusing a boy during a camp on Phillip Island in about 1961, when the Archbishop was a trainee priest.

Dr Pell said last night: "I have taken a leading role in condemning and exposing sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. To allege that I am now personally implicated in this evil is a smear of the most vindictive kind."

Church sources said last night that the man making the accusations against Dr Pell had a long criminal history. He had been convicted of various offences including drug trafficking.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, and Dr Pell's fellow church leaders rallied to the Archbishop's defence.

Mr Howard said he had telephoned Dr Pell last night.

"I believe completely George Pell's denial," he said. "I rang him this evening and spoke to him. They are, of course, very serious allegations and he's done the right thing in standing aside and the church has done the right thing to have the allegations fully investigated."

Asked the reasons for his faith in Dr Pell, Mr Howard said: "You either believe somebody or you don't."

The inquiry into the allegations will be conducted by the retired Victorian Supreme Court judge Alec Southwell, QC, who has been appointed by the National Committee of Professional Standards, the church's watchdog body on sexual abuse by priests.

Dr Pell addressed the media at 5.30pm outside St Mary's Cathedral. He said he was acting "for the good of the church and to preserve the dignity of the office of Archbishop".

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"I welcome the inquiry and a chance to clear my name, recognising that I am not above civil and church law," he said.

It is understood Dr Pell's accuser approached Broken Rites, a group which represents victims of sexual abuse in religious institutions, after seeing Dr Pell on television.

He claimed to recognise him from the boys' camp as "Big George", who had allegedly sexually molested him.

The man was repeatedly advised by National Committee of Professional Standards officials to take the matter to the police but "at this stage has declined to do so", an NCPS statement said.

An NCPS document, seen by the *Melbourne 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'."

Both Dr Pell and his accuser will be questioned by Mr Southwell during the inquiry. Dr Pell will travel to Melbourne for questioning and will be allowed legal representation.

Brother Michael Hill, the co-chair of the NCPS, said the "process will begin as soon as possible. The investigation will be conducted by Mr Southwell as he sees fit".

The NCPS said Dr Pell's accuser "must remain anonymous".

It said the initial complaint to the church had been made to Peter O'Callaghan, QC, the Independent Commissioner for the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

But Mr Callaghan had advised that it was not appropriate for him to handle the investigation because of the "commissioner's professional relationship with Dr Pell".

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

The Workplace Relations Minister, Tony Abbott - an outspoken Catholic and former seminarian - said last night that the allegations were "very, very serious" but "contrary to everything I know and admire about George Pell".

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