

Britain's top Catholic Cardinal O'Brien admits his 'sexual conduct fell well below the standards expected of a priest and archbishop' as he sends himself into retreat

- **The cleric apologised to those he has 'offended' and asked for forgiveness**
- **He said he is retiring and will play 'no further part' in the Catholic Church**
- **Cardinal O'Brien is accused of 'inappropriate' behaviour by four men**
- **The 74-year-old had resigned as Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh**
- **One of the men, a former priest, says the church has not acted ethically**

By Sam Webb and Alex Gore

Britain's most senior Catholic admitted today his 'sexual conduct' fell well below the 'standards expected of a priest'. Cardinal Keith O'Brien made the statement in response to allegations of 'inappropriate' behaviour levelled against him by three priests and a former priest.

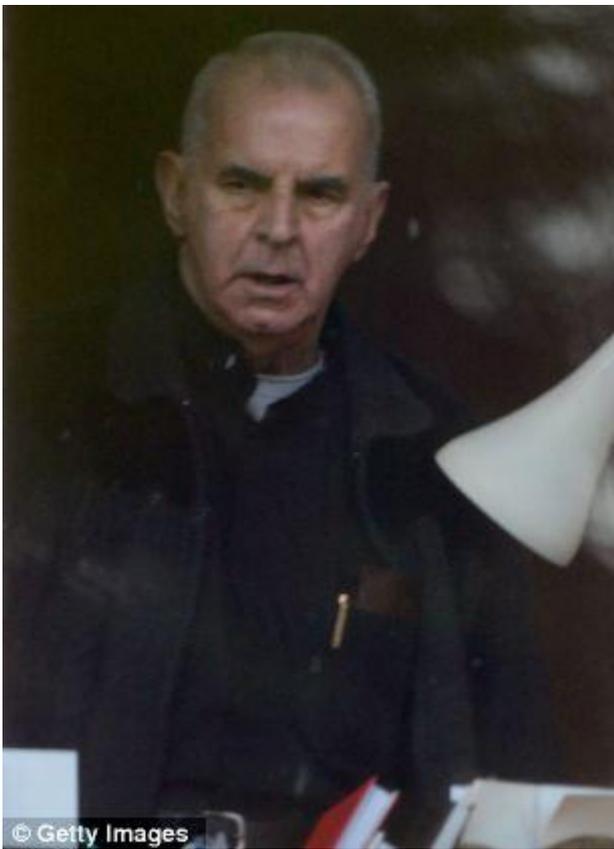
He apologised, asked for forgiveness and said he will play no further part in the Catholic Church.



Apology: Keith O'Brien has admitted his 'sexual conduct fell well below the standards expected of a priest'

The cleric resigned as Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh a day after the allegations stretching back 30 years were published last Sunday.

He said today: 'In recent days certain allegations which have been made against me have become public. Initially, their anonymous and non-specific nature led me to contest them.'



Admission: Cardinal O'Brien in the office at his official residence on in Edinburgh last week

'However, I wish to take this opportunity to admit that there have been times that my sexual conduct has fallen below the standards expected of me as a priest, archbishop and cardinal.

'To those I have offended, I apologise and ask forgiveness. To the Catholic Church and people of Scotland, I also apologise.

'I will now spend the rest of my life in retirement. I will play no further part in the public life of the Catholic Church in Scotland.'

The 74-year-old, who had been taking legal advice, tendered his resignation to Pope Benedict XVI in November, citing age and 'indifferent health'.

He had been widely expected to step down next month when he turns 75. His resignation was accepted by the pope on February 18 and it was announced on Monday that it was taking place with immediate effect.

In the Observer, which first reported the story last week, the former priest who made the accusations and remains anonymous, today said he had been 'disappointed' by the church's reaction. He said: 'There have been two sensations for me this week. One is feeling the hot breath of the media on the back of my neck and the other is sensing the cold disapproval of the church hierarchy for daring to break ranks. 'I feel like if they could crush me, they would.'



Resignation: The 74-year-old Cardinal pictured with Pope Benedict XVI and the Duke of Edinburgh

'The vacuum the church has created has allowed whimsy and speculation to distort the truth, and the only support I have been offered is a cursory email with a couple of telephone numbers of counsellors hundreds of miles away from me.'

The former clergyman claimed that when he was a seminarian at St Andrew's College, Drygrange, in 1980, Cardinal O'Brien made an inappropriate approach to him after night prayers.

Another priest said the Cardinal visited him at his parish and that inappropriate contact took place between them, while a third complainant alleged that he was subjected to 'unwanted behaviour' from the cleric in the 1980s after some late-night drinking.

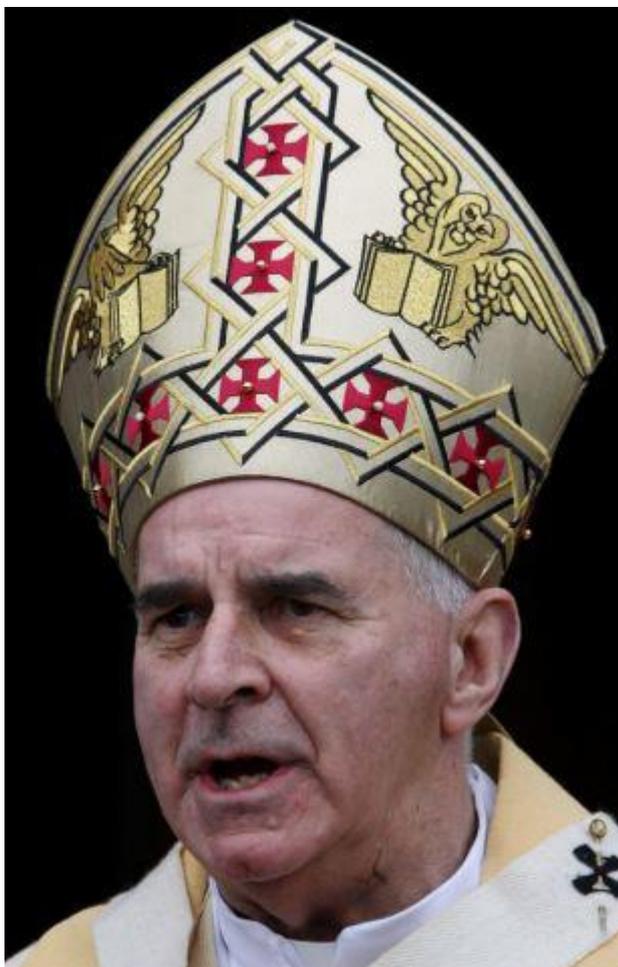
The cardinal has also been accused by another member of the clergy of using night prayers as an excuse for inappropriate contact.



Position: The Archbishop was the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland and the UK's senior priest

After stepping down, Cardinal O'Brien became Archbishop Emeritus of St Andrews and Edinburgh but had no role in the governance of the diocese.

He has not travelled to Rome for the conclave to elect the next pope meaning the church in Britain has no vote in the process.



Accused: The allegations of 'inappropriate' behaviour have been made by three priests and a former priest

The Scottish Catholic Media Office made no comment today, but last week its director Peter Kearney said the Cardinal's resignation had not been accelerated because of the allegations. He said: 'The timing is very unfortunate and it does appear as if one has followed the other, which in terms of chronology one has followed the other, but that's not the same as saying one caused the other. 'When it comes to responding to the allegations I think what he will do is act on his legal advice, and the legal advice at the moment would be to not publicly engage with the detail as it stands of the allegations.' Another priest has called for the Catholic Church in Scotland to be more open in dealing with complaints. Father John Robinson said: 'If the Catholic Church in Scotland is to heal itself, we need transparency and understanding.'

'We need to learn lessons from the mistakes we have made in the past and move on to become a more loving and understanding church which does not condemn victims or even abusers.'

Cardinal O'Brien had previously said sorry as it was revealed that he must resign now rather than wait until his 75th birthday later this month.

In a statement, he said: 'Looking back over my years of ministry: for any good I have been able to do, I thank God. For any failures, I apologise to all whom I have offended.'

Cardinal O'Brien's apology follows growing controversy over his leadership in recent weeks. The vehemence of his public stand against same-sex marriage led to condemnation by the gay lobby. However, in a surprise move just a day before the sex scandal broke, he upset traditionalists by calling for priests to be given the right to marry.



In Rome: The Cardinal had been due to travel to the Vatican to take part in the forthcoming papal conclave

Senior church figures are expected to go at 75, but the Vatican often allows leeway of a year or two. Following news of the sex scandal over the weekend, the Pope gave Cardinal O'Brien no choice. 'The Holy Father has now decided that my resignation will take effect today, 25 February 2013, and that he will appoint an Apostolic Administrator to govern the Archdiocese in my place until my successor is appointed,' Cardinal O'Brien said. The Cardinal said in his statement: 'I thank Pope Benedict XVI for his kindness and courtesy to me and...I wish him a long and happy retirement. I also ask God's blessing on my brother Cardinals who will soon gather in Rome to elect his successor. I will not join them for this conclave. I do not wish media attention in Rome to be focused on me – but rather on Pope Benedict XVI and on his successor.'