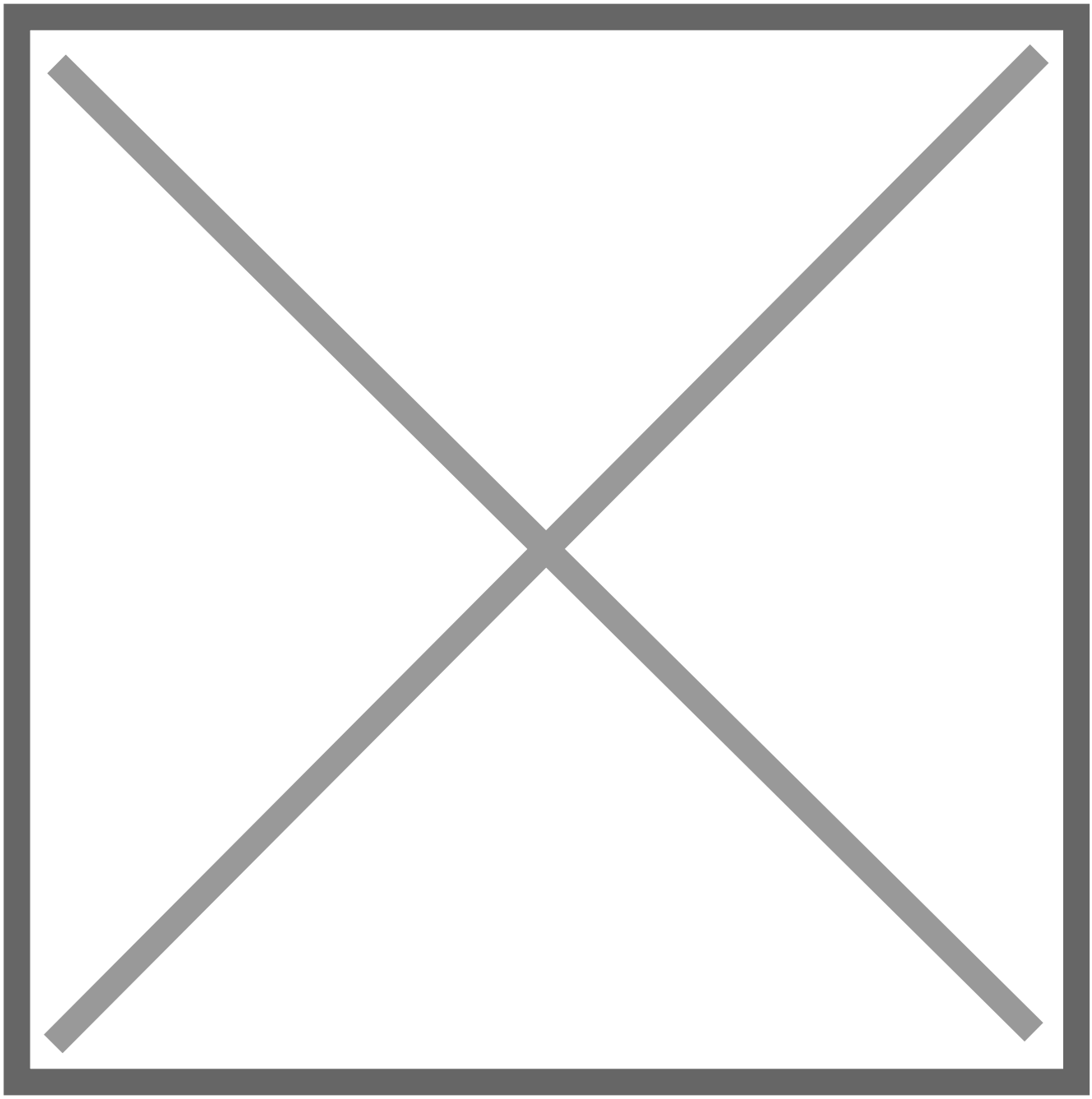
News
Obituary



In this 2017 file photo, Bishop Michael Bransfield, then head of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va., is seen at Wheeling Hospital. Bransfield, who retired in 2018 as head of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston amid multiple allegations of financial and sexual misconduct, died May 7, 2026, at age 82. (OSV News/The Catholic Spirit/Colleen Rowan)

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Wheeling, W.Va. — May 11, 2026
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Bishop Michael Bransfield, who retired in 2018 as head of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston amid multiple allegations of grave sexual and financial misconduct, died May 7 at age 82.

"As it is the tradition in our Church to pray for the dead as well as for the living, we pray for the repose of his soul, asking God's mercy upon him," the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, which encompasses the state of West Virginia, said in a May 7 statement.

The late bishop's funeral and burial will not take place in West Virginia, said the diocese.

Details about any funeral arrangements elsewhere — including Philadelphia, the bishop's hometown — are unclear.

Installed in the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese in 2005, the disgraced prelate had been ordered out of its territory in 2019 by Pope Francis. The late pope had also restricted the bishop from presiding or participating in "any public celebration" of the Mass, following a Vatican investigation into the prelate's conduct. The pope also told the bishop to make personal amends for some of the harm he had caused.

That same year, Bransfield was also banned from exercising his priestly ministry in his native Archdiocese of Philadelphia, to which he had relocated.

A 2018 investigative commission led by Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore — who was appointed apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charlestown following Bishop Bransfield's removal — found that the bishop had "subjected multiple seminarians and priests to unwanted sexual overtures, sexual harassment and sexual contact" even from his tenure as executive director and rector of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

The investigation — the findings of which were reported to the Vatican — found that "numerous witnesses" had "reported classic 'grooming' behaviors," although "no conclusive evidence was found that Bishop Bransfield committed sexual misconduct with minors."

Yet the report stated, "Several troubling incidents, however, were reported that cause concern that the Bishop may have also targeted minors, particularly altar servers."

At least two allegations made against the late bishop involved minors. In 2012, the Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, district attorney's office reopened a 2007 complaint against the bishop dating to a fondling incident from his tenure at an area Catholic high school. OSV News has requested a copy of the complaint and is working to verify if it was prosecuted.

In July 2019, the Washington Metropolitan Police received a complaint about a September 2012 incident in which a 9-year-old victim reported that Bransfield had touched her inappropriately during a pilgrimage to the national shrine.

OSV News obtained a copy of the second degree child sexual abuse complaint. It marks the "agency report status" as "closed" as of June 1, 2021. OSV News is working to determine the outcome of any further legal action.

The investigative commission under Lori determined the allegations of sexual harassment of adults "are credible."

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In a June 2019 letter to the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese's faithful, Lori said the commission also concluded that Bransfield had "engaged in a pattern of excessive and inappropriate spending" during his tenure as bishop, including expensive renovations of residences, personal travel, liquor, gifts and luxury items.

That spending, according to the report, included "almost $1 million" in private air travel between August 2007 and September 2018; more than $31,300 at one Philadelphia-area Italian restaurant over the course of 103 visits, an average of about $300 per meal; and more than $225,000 in clothing, jewelry and personal services — with almost $62,000 spent in 87 purchases at one Washington jewelry store alone.

In total, said investigators, the diocese under Bransfield had seen operating expenses exceed income by $187 million, with the bishop drawing from the diocesan endowment and mineral rights account to shore up the deficit.

The report also stated that "none" of the diocesan vicars "took action to address Bishop Bransfield's behavior" despite "witnessing multiple instances of harassing and abusive behavior over several years."

In addition, said investigators, "principles of corporate governance were not followed" during the bishop's tenure at the diocese, "which allowed him to spend the Diocese's money as he
saw fit without any meaningful review or approval" from diocesan officials and review boards.

Investigators also said that "Bishop Bransfield's abuse of alcohol and prescription drugs likely contributed to his harassing and abusive behavior," with "multiple instances of abuse ... reported when the Bishop was heavily intoxicated and/or under the influence of prescription pain medication."

Bishop Mark Brennan, who was named to head the Wheeling-Charleston diocese in 2019, announced in August 2020 that Bransfield was required to pay $441,000 in restitution to the diocese and was told to make a public apology to the people of the diocese for the scandal he created. Bransfield's retirement stipend was reduced to $2,250 per month, which Brennan's letter said was about a third of the $6,200 a month ordinarily provided to a retired bishop.

In a four-paragraph letter to the Wheeling-Charleston faithful dated Aug. 15, 2020, Bransfield wrote, "I am writing to apologize for any scandal or wonderment caused by words or actions attributed to me during my tenure as Bishop of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese."

"First, during my tenure I was reimbursed for certain expenditures that have been called into question as excessive, and I have been advised that I should reimburse a certain amount of money to the Diocese," he wrote. "I have now done so even though I believed that such reimbursements to me were proper."

Noting that "there have been allegations that by certain words and actions I have caused certain priests and seminarians to feel sexually harassed," he said, "Although that was never my intent, if anything that I said or did caused others to feel that way, then I am profoundly sorry."

He concluded, "I hope that this letter will help to achieve a kind of reconciliation with the Faithful of the Diocese."

Bransfield was also urged to apologize privately to certain individuals who reported abuse and harassment. Brennan, who was appointed Bishop Bransfield's successor, said in 2020 that diocesan officials were aware that some individuals had received a letter from the retired bishop.

Born in 1943, the future Bishop Bransfield attended Philadelphia Catholic schools and The Catholic University of America in Washington, where he earned a master's degree in philosophy. He studied for the priesthood at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in suburban Philadelphia and was ordained a priest in 1971. After serving at St. Albert Parish in Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania, he taught religion and was chaplain at Lansdale Catholic High School in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, from 1973 to 1980.

In 1980, he became assistant director and master of ceremonies at the national shrine. He served as its finance director from 1982 to 1986, when he was named its executive director. In 1990, when the national shrine was designated a basilica, he was named its rector. He was appointed the bishop of Wheeling-Charleston Dec. 9, 2004, and ordained its bishop Feb. 22, 2005. He retired Sept. 13, 2018.