

CANADA

Sexual abuse: judge clears Ouellet and orders accuser to pay compensation

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'Malicious' and 'reckless' allegations. The Superior Court of Quebec ruled that these were the nature of the allegations made against Cardinal Marc Ouellet by Pamela Groleau. The woman, a trainee pastoral assistant at the Archdiocese of Quebec, reported four

incidents in which she claimed to have been abused by the cardinal between 2008 and 2010. She made the accusations by joining a class action concerning abuse committed by the clergy in Quebec. In his case against Groleau, Cardinal Ouellet described himself as a victim of 'infamy' and 'defamation', as his name had been linked to criminal acts committed against minors.

During the trial, Groleau played down the significance of three of the four incidents reported in the class action: a shoulder massage, a handshake and sitting next to her during a conference. She presented these three incidents as a progression towards the alleged assault, which she said consisted of him sliding his hands behind her back, close to her buttocks. However, Judge Martin Castonguay did not believe this version of events, referring to them as 'entirely harmless' and 'significantly exaggerated' if they had actually taken place. Furthermore, the court deemed the alleged touching to be implausible, highlighting the changes the alleged victim had made to her account regarding both the duration and manner of the events. Castonguay also questioned Groleau's participation in the class action concerning child abuse: 'How can an ordinary citizen equate the acts described by Ms Groleau (a shoulder massage and a handshake, each lasting a few seconds; Cardinal Ouellet whispering her name; a hug; and a hand on her back) with the atrocities suffered by children at the hands of paedophile religious figures?' the judge asked.

The Court found that her account of the most recent incident had been embellished compared with a complaint made to Pope Francis in 2021, which led to an investigation being opened. However, this was closed the following year after it was established that there were 'no valid grounds to launch an investigation into sexual abuse'. 'Dissatisfied with how her complaint to Pope Francis had been handled, as stated in the judgement, she chose to alter her account of events to attract public attention. However, she did so in a manner that was reckless and malicious towards the cardinal.'

All of this caused serious damage to Cardinal Ouellet's reputation. In his case, he sought 100,000 dollars in compensation. The judge deemed this sum 'more than reasonable', upheld the claim and ordered the woman to pay the legal costs as well.

As he had previously announced, the cardinal confirmed his intention to donate the entire sum to organisations working to combat abuse against Canada's indigenous peoples. Groleau has not yet lodged an appeal. This brings to a close a painful chapter for the former Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, who was hospitalised earlier this year and certainly did not take the allegations and trial lightly.