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Oblate Father Alexis Joveneau was said to have inappropriately touched women and girls in the Innu community in Quebec where he ministered from 1953 until his death in 1992.



Visitors are seen outside St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal Oct. 2. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The revelations came during five days of hearings that ended Dec. 1 by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls regarding events in the Cote-Nord region in eastern Quebec.

Joveneau was a prominent religious leader among the Innu people and was held in high regard in the community.

Women from the Innu Nation of the Lower North Shore told the hearing in the town of Maliotenam that the Belgian priest assaulted them, especially when he heard their confession or visited their families.

They recalled how the priest would make them sit on his knee during confession and engage in inappropriate conduct, such as placing his tongue in their ear or touching their chest and playing with their bra.

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate said in a statement Nov. 29 that the order was "deeply concerned and saddened by the testimonies" and wanted "all the light be shed on these events."

The statement did not mention Joveneau.

The Oblates have a long history with various First Nation communities in Canada and Quebec.

The statement said the order intended to "collaborate fully" in the investigation and that the Oblates "strongly condemn any form of physical or psychological violence."

The late Bishop Henri Goudreault of the former Diocese of Labrador City-Schefferville presided at Joveneau's funeral Dec. 28, 1992, at the First Nation community of La Romaine. The parish in Marie-Reine-des-Indiens, which the Oblate missionary led for nearly 40 years, was part of the diocese.

In 2007, with the dissolution of the diocese, the parish became part of the Diocese of Baie-Comeau, now overseen by Bishop Jean-Pierre Blais. He declined to comment on the revelations.

Meanwhile, new class actions regarding sexual abuse were being filed and approved by the courts against religious congregations operating in Quebec.

The Superior Court of Quebec authorized a class action against the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. The lawsuit was against a congregation member by those sexually abused while they were students, residents or candidates for admission at Mont-Sacre-Coeur College, in Granby from 1932 until 2008. The man who initiated the class action said that beginning at age 13 in 1972 and continuing until 1975, then-Brother Claude Lebeau assaulted him more than 300 times. Other brothers are named in the class action, including Brother Jean-Guy Roy, who oversaw Radio Ville-Marie, a Catholic radio station in Montreal, for many years.

On Nov. 17, lawyers in another case asked the Superior Court to authorize a class action against the Order of Servites of Mary, a religious congregation that has been in Quebec for more than 100 years. The order administered Servites College in Ayer's Cliff from 1948 to 2007.

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Lawyers filed a case on behalf of a 57-year-old man who claimed he was sexually assaulted for two years beginning when he was 12 by Servite Father Jacques Desgrandchamps.

Desgrandchamps, now a priest in the Archdiocese of Ottawa, was placed on leave from ministry by Archbishop Terrence Prendergast. The congregation also placed the priest on leave.

In another case, Montreal's St. Joseph's Oratory asked the Supreme Court of Canada to remove its name from the list of institutions in a class action approved Sept. 26 by the Quebec Court of Appeal. The lawsuit was brought on behalf of all Quebec residents who were sexually abused by members of the Canadian Province of the Congregation of Holy Cross at any of its locations in Quebec including the oratory.

Oratory officials argued the lawsuit imposes a legal burden on a situation that dos not involved them but only the congregation.