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Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of Vatican's Dicastery of Bishops, concelebrates Mass at the Na

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of Vatican's Dicastery of Bishops, concelebrates Mass at the National Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec in this July 26, 2018, file photo. (CNS/Presence/Philippe Vaillancourt)

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Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Bishops, is named in a list of alleged abusers filed in support of a class-action lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Quebec.

The cardinal, a close adviser to Pope Francis, has been the prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, formerly the Congregation for Bishops, since 2010. He was appointed to the position by Pope Benedict XVI.

He is accused of actions allegedly committed against a young laywoman who was employed as a pastoral worker in 2008, when the cardinal was archbishop of Quebec. Court documents filed Aug. 16 indicate the actions consisted in "nonconsensual touching of a sexual nature."

Another bishop appears in the list. Auxiliary Bishop Jean-Paul Labrie, who died in 2001, served in the Quebec Archdiocese from 1977 to 1995. In his case, the alleged abuse occurred in 1968 when he was the superior of the seminary of Saint-Victor de Beauce in Quebec.

The class-action suit was authorized by a judge of the Superior Court of Quebec May 19. It was filed on behalf of all "people having been sexually abused by a member of the diocesan clergy" or "by a religious, a lay pastoral staff member, an employee, and a lay or religious volunteer" under the responsibility of the Quebec Archdiocese between January 1, 1940, and the upcoming ruling in the case.

The archdiocese originally asked that the names of the alleged abusers identified by 101 plaintiffs not be disclosed. The archdiocese's lawyer advised the court July 22 that the archdiocese no longer sought to keep the names confidential.

The lawsuit includes the names of priests associated with the Quebec seminary, as well as those serving in the archdiocese, in parishes and at educational institutions. Most of those named are deceased. Many of the victims were younger than 18 at the time of the first alleged abuse.

Archdiocesan authorities were informed in January 2021 of the allegations against Ouellet. A leader of the Archdiocesan Committee for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons even asked the victim to personally write a letter to Pope Francis.

An email from the Vatican Feb. 23, 2021, acknowledged that the pope read the letter and that he had appointed an investigator to the case: Jesuit Fr. Jacques Servais, rector of the Casa Balthasar in Rome, a residence for young people discerning a call to religious life and for theology students.

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Court documents indicate that in August 2008, a 23-year-old woman identified as "F" started working as a pastoral agent in the Quebec Archdiocese and attended a meeting with all archdiocesan personnel. There, she met Ouellet, for the first time.

She was sitting in the back of the room, documents said, when she "suddenly felt two hands on her shoulders, and they started to strongly massage her shoulders."

She recognized the cardinal right away, and "he smiled at her and caressed her back before leaving."

"F was frozen following this intrusion and didn't know how to react," the lawsuit said. She recognized she felt troubled, and "a feeling of unease stayed with her for the rest of the day."

A few months later, she again met the cardinal during a reception. He kissed her "with familiarity" and "firmly pressed her against him while caressing her back with his hands," the document said.

In February 2010, during a party, the cardinal said to the young woman that "he could surely kiss her again, 'for there isn't any harm in spoiling oneself a bit.' F found this comment completely inappropriate," the document said. The cardinal went ahead and "slid his hand down F's back, down to her buttocks," it said.

Afterward, according to the document, F avoided all meetings and locations where she might run into the cardinal. "When F dares to speak of her uneasiness toward the cardinal, she is told that he is very warm and friendly, and that she isn't the only woman to have had this sort of problem with him," the filing stated.

It was 10 years later, following a workshop on sexual abuse, that the pastoral worker "understood that the actions of Cardinal Ouellet were nonconsensual touching of a sexual nature, and therefore a sexual aggression," the document said.

In November 2020, without revealing the cardinal's name, the complainant sent an email to the Archdiocesan Committee for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons. In January 2021, she mentioned Ouellet's name to the diocesan authorities. They answered that the pope should immediately be informed.

The young woman is one of 101 people who contacted the Arsenault Dufresne Wee Avocats law firm since May when the class-action suit was authorized by Superior Court Judge Bernard Godbout.

The representative plaintiffs are Gaétan Bégin and Pierre Bolduc. Both men claim to have been assaulted by their respective parish priest over half a century ago.

Bégin recalled in the lawsuit that in 1960, his father and a doctor went to the archdiocesan offices to denounce the abuse committed by Fr. Rosaire Giguère. The offending priest was at first sent away "to rest," before being transferred to another

parish. Giguère died in 1974. In the list of alleged aggressors, his name is mentioned four times.

Bolduc said in the court filing he was abused for the first time at the rectory of a parish in Robertsonville a few hours after a movie outing offered by his pastor, Fr. Jean-Marie Bégin, a priest who had been active within Catholic Action movements. He was the diocesan chaplain of the Young Christian Workers and of the Ligue ouvrière Catholique, a Quebec-based labor movement.

In 1986, Bégin, 60, hanged himself at his cottage in Coleraine. His name appears six times in the list of alleged assailants.

The motion filed with the court includes testimonies by five other victims.

The archdiocese declined to comment on the lawsuit.

"A press release will be issued at a later date," said the assistant to Auxiliary Bishop Marc Pelchat, who is responsible for the Archdiocesan Committee for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons.