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Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, leaves the opening session of the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment at the Vatican Oct 3. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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The Vatican Secretariat of State sent a formal statement to the French Embassy to the Holy See reaffirming that Pope Francis had sent a top Vatican official to investigate a French religious congregation and warning that interference by a French civil court in an internal church matter could be a "serious violation" of religious freedom.

Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office, confirmed April 13 that the Vatican had sent an explanatory "note verbale" to the embassy highlighting several points in connection to a French civil court decision made public April 3.

The ruling by the one-judge tribunal of Lorient in France ordered 79-year-old Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, retired prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, and the two religious who assisted him in the investigation to pay a former nun more than $194,000 for material damages, more than $10,000 for "moral prejudice" and more than $10,000 in legal costs for "abuse of rights" and "lack of impartiality" in their decision to dismiss her from her religious community. That community, the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit, was also ordered to pay the former nun $36,000 as a "duty of relief."

The defendants were appealing, according to La Croix, the French Catholic daily newspaper.

The Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit was founded in 1943 by Father Victor-Alain Berto, who had been close to traditionalist Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. Accusations of abuse by the founder, by a former chaplain and within the community surfaced in 2010, triggering a series of investigations over the years.

Pope Francis ordered an apostolic visitation of the congregation in 2020 led by Ouellet, which resulted in the expulsion of Sabine de la Valette, formerly Sister Marie Ferréol, for "bad spirit." She had been a consecrated member of the community located in Berné for 34 years and had denounced "serious abuses and facts"

happening in the community, according to her lawyer, Adeline le Gouvello de la Porte.

De la Valette launched a civil suit for damages claiming dismissal without cause and without the possibility of defending herself. She was never informed of "the facts of which she was allegedly guilty, despite her repeated requests," Gouvello de la Porte had said during initial court proceedings.

The court ruled in De la Valette's favor April 3, finding she was expelled without reason and ordering damages to be paid by the defendants.

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Some issues arose during the court proceedings, including claims there was no proof the cardinal's investigation was mandated by the pope, that the cardinal was friendly with a member of the congregation, which would have adversely affected a need for impartiality, and that the Vatican had not released its files related to the investigation, which are reserved in canonical matters.

The April 13 communique from Bruni said the note to the French embassy said Cardinal Ouellet "never received any summons from the Lorient tribunal," and "he did indeed conduct an apostolic visitation to the institute of the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit in compliance with a pontifical mandate."

"Following this visitation, a series of canonical measures were taken against Ms. Sabine de la Valette, including her dismissal from the religious institute," Bruni wrote.

The Vatican learned about the "alleged decision of the tribunal of Lorient in France … only from the press," he wrote.

Any final judgment from the Lorient tribunal, he wrote, "could raise not only significant issues concerning immunity, but if it ruled on internal discipline and membership in a religious institute, it could also constitute a serious violation of the fundamental right of religious freedom and of the right of free association of Catholic faithful."