

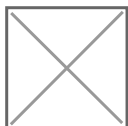
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Cardinal Lacroix speaks at panel

Canadian Cardinal Gérald C. Lacroix of Québec speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 11, 2023. André Denis, a retired judge mandated by Pope Francis to investigate accusations of sexual abuse made against Cardinal Lacroix, has said he found no evidence to support the accusations -- a result significantly impacted by the cardinal's accuser refusing to participate in the investigation. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

François Gloutnay

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André Denis, a retired Quebec superior court judge mandated by Pope Francis to investigate accusations of sexual abuse made against Cardinal Gérald C. Lacroix, Archbishop of Quebec, has said he found no evidence to support the accusations. But Denis noted the investigation's conclusion was significantly impacted by the accuser's refusal to participate — something which could change in the future — leaving the cardinal in the meantime feeling like he was "fighting a ghost."

"The elements collected during my investigation make it implausible that the facts alleged against the cardinal occurred," Denis wrote in his 66-page report submitted to Francis May 6. "I do not find sufficient elements to justify the holding of a canonical trial against Cardinal Lacroix and this is the conclusion that I formulated to Pope Francis."

Denis on May 21 made public a 10-page summary of this report and held a press conference the same day to answer questions.

On Jan. 25, the cardinal, who is also the primate of the Catholic Church in Canada, was mentioned in a document from anonymous victims filed as part of a class action against the Archdiocese of Quebec. The archdiocese is being sued on behalf of people who allege they were sexually assaulted by members of the clergy, their staff and their volunteers from Jan. 1, 1940, to the present.

"The diocese recognizes that this action is well-founded for a certain number of plaintiffs and wishes to reach a settlement out of court as soon as possible. It is a wish that everyone shares," the judge wrote.

The attack with which the archbishop is accused allegedly occurred in 1987-1988 in Quebec.

The person making the allegation claims she was a minor at the time. In 1987, Cardinal Lacroix was not yet a priest. It was then-Bishop Maurice Couture (later the archbishop of Quebec) who ordained him on Oct. 8, 1988.

Because of the accusation, the cardinal said he was "temporarily withdrawing from his activities until the situation is clarified," though he denied the allegations.

On Feb. 8, Francis asked Denis to investigate "on the facts, circumstances and imputability of the alleged offense" targeting Cardinal Lacroix.

Denis said his investigation was impaired by the fact that he was not able to interview the person who made the accusations.

"Her statement is anonymous and she refuses to collaborate in my investigation," Denis wrote in his report.

"She has the right to do so and she must be treated with respect, empathy and welcome as one should do with any human person," he added.

But Denis made clear this refusal "greatly affected" the investigation into the cardinal.

"If I cannot affirm that his denunciation is unfounded, I certainly cannot endorse it on the basis of the facts revealed by my investigation," Denis wrote in the conclusion of his report.

"I am unable to say whether the alleged act took place or not. I am unable to even identify a place, an event, a specific date or any circumstance. The applicant's refusal to collaborate in the slightest degree with my investigation leaves me helpless," he related to the pope.

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Judge Denis regretted that Lacroix could "never know who accused him" or "the facts with which he is accused," and feared the accusation leveled against the cardinal would remain "forever" shrouded in anonymity.

"I tried on several occasions to convince the plaintiff to help me complete my mandate. Without success," Denis said in his summary. "I asked at the very least that she give me a date, a place, a detail relevant to her complaint. She refused. I requested access to the redacted statement that each plaintiff must file with the court to explain the circumstances of the assault of which he or she claims to be a victim. She refused."

It was after these repeated refusals that the judge decided to make public the request for an investigation that he had obtained from Francis.

In response to questions from *Présence*, a French-language news agency based in Quebec, Denis said he would still be willing to meet the cardinal's accuser.

"For me, it's never too late. If tomorrow the plaintiff said to me: 'I want to meet you to explain the events,' I would ask the Pope for an additional mandate in order to complete my investigation."

In his investigation, Denis said he looked at the cardinal's entire career in Quebec, but with a special focus on the years 1987, when he was a trainee in parish ministry, and 1988.

"The places he frequented, the internship in which he participated and his pastoral mission in 1987 and 1988 do not fit with the presence of a young woman of 17 years old accompanying her parents to biblical meetings," he said.

"The evidence that I have gathered during my long investigation shows that Msgr. Gérald Lacroix never showed any familiarity, inappropriate gesture or allusion of a sexual nature neither in 1987 and 1988 nor at any period of his life as a member of the church of Quebec since he was present there," he continued.

"All those who were in contact with Gérald Lacroix in 1987 and 1988 and whom I met during my investigation do not believe that the latter committed the actions for which he is accused, neither in 1987 and 1988, nor before nor after," Denis said. "The same conclusion is evident from the numerous witnesses met regarding the entire pastoral career of Cardinal Lacroix since he was in Quebec."

Denis also told *Présence* he met with the cardinal to get his version of events.

"I questioned him at length to find out what he knew on this subject. He told me with conviction that he had never taken the actions that the plaintiff accused him of. Not with her, not with any other person.

"It's not easy for him. He told me: 'I'm fighting a ghost.'"

At the Superior Court of Quebec, Denis is recognized as the first judge in Canada to preside over a trial under the Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act. In 2009, he sentenced Rwandan refugee Désiré Munyaneza to life imprisonment for his active participation in the 1994 genocide.

An earlier report from *Presence* indicated a significant amount of distrust may have factored into the accuser's refusal to participate. According to *Presence*, lawyer Alain Arsenault, who is leading the class action suit against the Archdiocese of Quebec, said a church-appointed investigation "is not credible."

Today, he said, "we no longer ask police officers to investigate the police. It's elementary. And it's the same for the church. As long as it is an internal process, chaired by friends as we saw for Cardinal Marc Ouellet (subject of a recent investigation conducted by the Vatican), it will not be credible."

The Vatican Press office declared on May 21 that the pope endorsed Denis' conclusion and that "no other canonical procedure is planned" as a result.

"In light of the facts examined by the judge, the report does not make it possible to identify actions that amount to misconduct or abuse on the part of Cardinal Gérald C. Lacroix," the official statement said.