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Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, former prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, speaks to reporters

Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, former prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, speaks to reporters at the Vatican Feb. 20, 2023. (CNS/Justin McLellan)

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A judge in Montreal has found sexual misconduct accusations against Quebec's Cardinal Marc Ouellet to be unfounded and ordered his accuser to pay him \$100,000.

The cardinal, retired since April 2024, had been under a cloud of suspicion since Paméla Groleau had accused him of touching her without consent on three occasions between 2008 and 2010 while she was training or working as a lay pastoral agent. She also told the court she felt "hunted" at another event, saying Ouellet came from across the room to sit next to her.

"The court finds that the allegations describing the four events cited by Ms. Groleau in the context of the class action are false," Superior Court Justice Martin Castonguay wrote in a decision released Aug. 31.

Castonguay concluded that Groleau's testimony against the now 82-year-old Ouellet "was neither credible nor reliable," noting in his judgment that she had changed her story several times.

Two other women testified against Ouellet at the trial, but the judge ruled their testimony was not pertinent to the question of whether Groleau defamed the cardinal. He also concluded Ouellet was "not the author of the gestures" brought into evidence by one of the women.

The allegations against the cardinal surfaced in 2022 as part of a class-action lawsuit launched against the Archdiocese of Quebec and dozens of clergy and lay members. In response, Ouellet publicly denied any wrongdoing and countered with a \$100,000 (US \$72,230) defamation countersuit against his accuser, claiming she had damaged his reputation, honor and dignity.

After the lawsuit was filed, the Vatican chose not to launch its own investigation into the cardinal. In a statement issued Aug. 18, 2022, by Matteo Bruni, then director of the Press Office of the Holy See, the Vatican found there were "insufficient elements to open a canonical investigation for sexual assault by Cardinal Ouellet against person F," as Groleau was identified at the time.

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In his ruling, Castonguay said the damage to Ouellet — former archbishop of Quebec who would serve as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops under Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis — his reputation was "amplified by the chosen vehicle, meaning that of a class action aimed principally at religious pedophiles, thereby equating Cardinal Ouellet, in the eyes of the 'ordinary citizen,' with that group of individuals."

He said it "is difficult to quantify" the true impact of the allegations against Ouellet and awarded him the \$100,000 he sought.

The class action against the Archdiocese of Quebec was ratified Aug. 12, with the Quebec Superior Court approving a \$31.5 million (U.S. \$22.66 million) out-of-court settlement for people who say they were sexually abused by members of the church dating back to 1940.

In a statement about the ruling in favor of their client, Ouellet's lawyers were pleased the court recognized the injustice suffered by the cardinal.

"This judgment reaffirms a fundamental principle: even in the context of judicial proceedings, serious allegations must be based on accurate and relevant facts and advanced with the rigor required by their gravity," said Dominique Ménard in the statement.

The cardinal has promised to donate the damages he was awarded to organizations fighting against sexual abuse experienced by Indigenous Canadians.

The class action also accused Quebec's current archbishop, Cardinal Gérald Lacroix, of sexual misconduct. After stepping aside for six months in early 2024, Lacroix resumed his role after a Vatican-mandated investigation found no evidence to support the accusations.