

## **Bangor Daily News**

### **'50s orphans claim abuse, sue Quebec**

By Clyde H. Farnsworth The New York Times, Special to the BDN

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MONTREAL — Herve Bertrand remembers the day well — March 18, 1955 — when a nun told him and the others in his third-grade class at the Mont Providence orphanage in north Montreal that they had all been declared “mentally deficient.”

He was 12 and did not fully realize the implications. The nun, Sister Colette Francoise of the Sisters of Providence, was in tears. Outside the small windows of the massive redbrick structure, the sullen gray sky was like a slab of cold steel. What happened next is part of one of the darker chapters of Quebec history, which is only now coming to light as hundreds of victims like Bertrand relate their stories and seek compensation and an apology from the Quebec government and seven Roman Catholic religious orders.

Schooling stopped. Young Bertrand and his classmates were no longer students; they were inmates in a mental institution and would be subjected to numbing physical, mental and sexual abuse by lay monitors and the nuns themselves.

Oddly, the worst experience led to his release two years later. He was riding in an elevator with a monitor, who stopped it between floors and sodomized him. When he told the chaplain, he was called a liar and sent to the Mont St. Antoine reform school, also in Montreal.

“That was a paradise,” said Bertrand, 50, who makes a living as a plumber. “At Providence, we were slaves. Quebec locked us up and threw away the key.”

The orphanage had been converted into a psychiatric hospital. A later investigating commission adduced a motive: more money from the state. Government subsidies were \$2.75 a day for psychiatric patients and only \$1.25 a day for orphans.

As the tale has unfolded, it appears that more than 5,000 abandoned children of the 1940s and 1950s were improperly classified as mentally retarded and committed to several of Quebec’s 16 psychiatric hospitals, then owned and run by the Roman Catholic Church.

Bertrand, who heads a committee of the orphans seeking restitution, is among the more fortunate. Thanks to the reform school and later a five-year stint in the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he learned the trade of plumber, he has been able to put his life back together. Others have not.

Gilles Bourbonniere, 51, lives on tranquilizers and still cannot read and write, and Denis Le Coq, 52, has testicular problems from early beatings and has taken anti-depressant pills for the last 35 years. They were with Bertrand at Mont Providence, but did not get away until much later.

Denis Lazure, who was practicing psychiatry in the early 1960s and is now a member of the Quebec Legislative Assembly, said he was part of a commission that investigated the mental institutions during that period. "One of our main findings was that out of 22,000 patients we felt that at least one-third had no business being there."

Bernard Piche, 75, the doctor who signed the document certifying the mental deficiencies at Mont Providence, still practices part time at the Louis H. Lafontaine psychiatric hospital in Montreal.

He declined to respond to requests for an interview. In a comment to Photo Police, a Montreal crime tabloid, he described the forms he signed as "bureaucracy, paperwork" and acknowledged that he could not actually remember examining any students.

Bertrand said he recently confronted Piche and asked heatedly, "Why did you sign this?" The doctor, according to Bertrand, replied, "I did it because the nuns asked me to."

Robert Fauteux, the lawyer for the orphans' committee, said the suits filed in Montreal and Quebec City promise to be the biggest court action in Quebec history and predicted they might take as long as three years to play out.

In a class-action petition, the committee is seeking \$1.2 billion, which could be split among as many as 2,000 people. In addition, the orphans have already filed 120 criminal complaints against members of the religious orders and lay personnel supposedly involved in the abusive treatment.

John Parisella, chief of staff for Premier Robert Bourassa of Quebec, said that because the matter was now before the courts it would not be appropriate for the government to comment.

The orphans are known as the Children of Duplessis, after Premier Maurice Duplessis, a fervent Roman Catholic whom everyone called "the chief" and whose Union Nationale movement ran Quebec with a strong hand throughout most of the 1940s and 1950s.

This was just before Quebec's so-called "quiet revolution" began lifting living standards and weakening the role of the Roman Catholic Church as a social force. The two earlier decades had been a period of widespread poverty, few social services and predominance of the church.

Dominique Jean, professor of Quebec history at Carleton University in Ottawa, said there had been a "scapegoating" of the church, which she finds "very sad" because "the whole of Quebec society was to blame."

The task of caring for dependent children, she noted, had been thrown at the religious orders, and people on the outside “just closed their eyes to what was happening.”

The religious orders, she said, were desperate for money. “Nuns were in charge of rooms of 50 turbulent pre-adolescents. So there were bound to be situations where they looked for expedient solutions.”

Yet she acknowledged “the church had a responsibility to maintain ethical standards, and it did not.”

Pauline Gill, a Montreal sociologist who has interviewed many principals, said the children “became the victims of the complicity of the three elements of power of that day — the church, the state and the medical profession.”

Chiefly for financial reasons, the Duplessis government made the initial decision to put dependent children into mental hospitals. The provincial government got fat subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals, but hardly anything for orphanages. Duplessis was much praised at the time for his hospital building program.

To get more children into the institutions, the provincial government offered its own encouragements to the religious orders — the \$2.75 a day for psychiatric patients against \$1.25 a day for student orphans. For the system to work, doctors had to be willing to be less than diligent in their examinations and the certificates they signed.

One other consideration was the urgent need for labor in the hospitals. The orphans were a cheap supply; they were paid a few cents a week. Ms. Gill contends that under the morality of the times the nuns “thought they had the right to judge and punish illegitimate children as if those children were guilty of the sins of their parents.”