

**Quebec to Give Duplessis Orphans a Public Apology**  
**Campbell Clark, *National Post***  
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*Largest Youth Abuse Case: 3,000 survivors hope for financial compensation*

The Quebec government is to issue an apology over the treatment of the so-called Duplessis Orphans, who were interned in mental institutions in the 1930s, '40s and '50s after being abandoned by their parents, the *National Post* has learned.

Those representing the estimated 3,000 surviving orphans hope the public apology by Lucien Bouchard, the Quebec premier, will be a first step in obtaining financial compensation similar to that offered to victims of abuse at the Mount Cashel orphanage in Newfoundland, and others who suffered similar treatment at institutions in other provinces.

Hundreds of the Duplessis Orphans, so-named because Maurice Duplessis, the former Quebec premier, governed the province during most of the years of their internment, have reported harsh treatment and physical and sexual abuse in institutions run by Catholic religious orders.

The allegations involved forced confinement, beatings, molestation and even rape.

The episode is believed to be the largest case of institution-based youth abuse in Canadian history.

Quebec's College of Physicians has also, for the first time, agreed to express the medical profession's "regrets," and to launch a program to re-evaluate the cases of orphans who were falsely diagnosed as mentally retarded or mentally ill.

The public apologies, expected to be made in January or February, will also involve correcting, where necessary, erroneous civil records, including birth certificates that may have wrongly listed the orphans' parents as unknown.

Many of the details surrounding the plight of the orphans remain a mystery, but it is believed that many children abandoned by their natural parents were designated as mentally ill so as to obtain more funding for their care. At that time, Quebec could obtain more federal funds for health-care institutions than for schools and orphanages.

Most of the “orphans” were in fact children born of unmarried parents and left in the care of religious orders that operated orphanages, it is claimed. In some cases those establishments were transformed into health-care facilities and in other cases the children were shipped from orphanages to existing hospitals, also run by religious orders.

Doctors issued terse, unexplained diagnoses that falsely labelled many of the children mentally deficient, it is claimed.

The motive was to have them sent to the institutions, where most received little or no education.

While Mr. Bouchard has agreed the Quebec government should acknowledge responsibility for the harm done under previous governments, his government will not — at least for now — offer cash compensation.

Representatives of the orphans groups said Mr. Bouchard told them during an October meeting that he will not offer financial compensation until he knows their number — and he never committed to compensating them even if such a tally is provided.

Efforts by surviving orphans to launch class-action suits in 1992 against the government and religious orders were blocked in the courts, and the Quebec government later concluded it was unable to prosecute the 321 criminal complaints of physical and sexual abuse against nuns, monks, and institution monitors.

An association representing many orphans, the Comité des Orphelins Institutionnalisés de Duplessis, has shifted strategy and agreed to accept apologies and help in correcting records without insisting financial compensation come at the same time. However, they demand that compensation follow in the near future. The Quebec government has also offered the committee \$300,000 over three years to

coordinate services for the orphans, and the committee hopes it will also help locate all the surviving orphans — some of whom might be able to bolster the credibility of compensation claims.

But as many of the alleged victims grow older — they now range in age from 45 to 80 — some despair they will never see the kind of compensation offered to similar victims in other provinces. Some have died of old age, some of illness, and a greater-than-average number from suicide.

“That happened to some. They died and never got anything,” said Noella Doucet, 58, who spent much of her youth in a series of institutions, where she said she was confined in cells, beaten, and molested. “And I have the impression that is going to happen to me one day.”

The Duplessis Orphans retain a dubious distinction, as the most prominent group of victims still without an apology or compensation. In Newfoundland, the provincial government offered a settlement to victims of abuse at the Mount Cashel orphanage; in B.C., the government offered 150 former students of a school for the deaf and blind cash settlements of \$3,000 to \$60,000. Nova Scotia set up a \$43.7-million program to compensate more than 1,000 former residents of provincial youth facilities.

The Catholic church and the religious orders that ran the institutions have never agreed to discuss the issue with orphan groups, and has remained reluctant to comment. After several requests for an interview over more than a week, a spokesman for Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte, the archbishop of Montreal, said she could not find anyone who was available.

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