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NEWS

Court cites Community of Jesus influence in abuse of students

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ORLEANS — An Ontario court has found that a former Christian school that adopted the ideas and practices of the Community of Jesus in Orleans engaged in decades of abuse toward students.

"I have concluded that the evidence of maltreatment and the varieties of abuse perpetrated on students' bodies and minds in the name of the (Community of Jesus) values of submission and obedience was class-wide and decades-wide," Judge Janet Leiper of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice wrote in a decision issued Wednesday in a class-action suit filed by five former students.

- Read the full-text of the Ontario court ruling

The Community of Jesus was not named as a defendant, but the suit tried to tie the school's methods of discipline and religious instruction to the teaching and practices of community founders Cay Anderson and Judy Sorensen.

"The facts that there was no claim against the Community of Jesus, no finding against the Community, no finding that employees or representatives of the Community ever engaged in misconduct and no claim that any wrongful conduct ever took place at the Community are the most significant facts of the matter," Community of Jesus attorney Jeffrey Robbins said in a statement Thursday.

The 75-page ruling offered several details about the community's influence on and financial ties with Grenville Christian College in Brockville, Ontario, a primary and secondary school that closed in 2007.

The college was founded in 1969 as Berean Christian School by two couples, Al and Mary Haig and Charles and Betty Farnsworth. By 1973 the school was in debt and disrepair, and Al

Haig invited Anderson and Sorensen to speak to staff about the Community of Jesus way of life and religious beliefs, according to the ruling.

"The Berean school community adopted the COJ ideas and practices," the ruling says. "The COJ doctrine became the foundation for the school's approach," including confrontation and "tough love" to correct others from sinful ways of thinking and behaving.

Anderson and Sorensen were the spiritual leaders in Massachusetts, and the school headmaster was the spiritual leader in the field, according to the ruling.

Many school staff members took lifetime vows to join the Community of Jesus as nonresident members and regularly traveled to Orleans to take part in retreats, the ruling says. Those who joined paid 10% of their salaries to the community. The Berean School also made financial contributions to the community to pay for retreats and the purchase of a house in Rock Harbor, according to the ruling.

The Community of Jesus doctrine also became the foundation for Grenville Christian College when the Berean school changed its name in 1974.

The plaintiffs are five former boarding school students who attended Grenville at various times between 1973 and 1997. The class action comprises 1,360 former Grenville boarding students. In addition to Grenville, the suit names its diocese and founders as defendants.

According to Leiper's analysis, the college breached its duty of care to the students, departed from educational standards of the day and "created a place to mould students using the precepts and norms of the COJ."

Leiper said the abusive and authoritarian culture at Grenville exploited developing adolescents placed in its care.

"It obscured its more extreme practices from its patrons and parents," she wrote. "It failed to keep records of the more extreme discipline practices. It had no written policy on its disciplinary practices. It required the appearance of happiness, enforced by strict discipline."

Hidden costs for many students came at the expense of physical and emotional stability and well-being, the ruling states.

Students who were considered to be disobedient, unruly, sinful or acting out were isolated, humiliated or punished with chores such as scrubbing bathroom floors with a toothbrush,

cutting grass with a pair of scissors or running laps in the middle of the night, according to the ruling.

One plaintiff said Charles Farnsworth asked him questions about his sexual fantasies and prior sexual experiences and "moved his hand from his leg onto his genital area" during a private session.

Staff members who fell out of favor with administrators were separated from their children, had water thrown at them, were criticized in front of their children and were sent to the Community of Jesus in Orleans for indefinite periods of time, the ruling states.

The ruling found Grenville administrators operated the college without any accountability to a board or set of written policies.

"The headmasters were the absolute masters of the Grenville domain, indulging in acts of petty cruelty, and doling out disproportionate physical and emotional pain to vulnerable or less-favored students," Leiper wrote.

Robbins, the community's attorney, countered: "The most important facts speak for themselves: the plaintiffs in a Canadian court case alleged 13 years ago that as many as 45 years ago, individuals at an institution not in any way, shape or form run or directed by the Community of Jesus, in another location in another country that is hundreds of miles away from Cape Cod, engaged in wrongful conduct against them.

"There was no claim filed against the Community of Jesus. There was no finding by the Court that the Community of Jesus had engaged in wrongdoing. What there was was the Canadian plaintiffs' claim that certain individuals in Canada took what they regarded as the 'idea' of certain individuals who 45 years ago had been involved with the Community and that those purported 'ideas' were in some fashion partially 'responsible' for the misconduct of staff at the Canadian school," Robbins said via email.

During a five-week trial, the plaintiffs called two expert witnesses, 12 former students and three former staff members at Grenville. The defendants called no expert witnesses.

Leiper found that evidence presented by the plaintiffs was consistent and corroborated by documents, admissions of staff, students and administrators.

Leiper judged each of the five plaintiffs credible and reliable. "Furthermore, the fact that Grenville is no longer in existence does not remove the policy aims of applying punitive

damages," she wrote, saying she found such damages were appropriate.

A class-action case management judge will determine the next steps in the process.

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