

Orphans of the 1950's, Telling of Abuse, Sue Quebec

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MONTREAL— Hervé 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.

By declaring the orphans mentally deficient, Quebec and the church had found a way to line their coffers: the province obtained big subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals and it in turn paid the church more than twice as much for caring for psychiatric patients as it did for orphans.

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 Mr. Bertrand relate their stories and seek compensation and an apology from the Quebec government and seven Roman Catholic religious orders. No More Schooling

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," Mr. Bertrand, 50, a plumber, said. "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 province. Government subsidies were \$2.75 a day for psychiatric patients and only \$1.25 a day for orphans. Thousands Wrongly Classified

As the tale has unfolded, it appears that more than 5,000 abandoned children of the 1940's and 1950's 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.

Mr. 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 antidepressant pills for the last 35 years. They were with Mr. Bertrand at Mont Providence, but did not get away until much later.

Denis Lazure, who was practicing psychiatry in the early 1960's and is now a member of the Quebec Legislative Assembly, said he was part of a commission that investigated the mental institutions in 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.

Mr. Bertrand said he recently confronted Dr. Piché and asked heatedly, "Why did you sign this?" The doctor, according to Mr. Bertrand, replied, "I did it because the nuns asked me to." Group Seeks \$1.2 Billion

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 the province's history and predicted they might take 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 Catholic whom everyone called "the chief" and whose Union National movement ran Quebec with a strong hand throughout most of the 1940's and 1950's.

This was just before Quebec's so-called "quiet revolution" began lifting living standards and weakening the role of the 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. 'Just Closed Their Eyes'

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 said, 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."

But she acknowledged "the church had a responsibility to maintain ethical standards, and it did not."

Pauline Gill, a Montreal sociologist who has interviewed many of the orphans, said they "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 big subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals, but hardly anything for orphanages. Mr. Duplessis was much praised at the time for his hospital building program. Doctors Less Than Diligent

To get more children into the institutions, the provincial government offered its own encouragement 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."

Ms. Gill is the author of "The Children of Duplessis," which was published in Montreal in 1991 and which recounts the experiences of Alice Quinton, now 56, who was confined and mistreated over 16 years at the St. Julien hospital in St. Ferdinand d'Halifax south of Quebec City.

In the book, young Alice, then a teen-ager, recalls seeing a nun beat another teen-ager with a chain after the latter had complained about a beating the same nun had given to a

5-year-old girl, who later died.

The second teen-ager was Marion Kelly, now 59, who recalled in a recent interview being not only beaten, but also strapped to a bed frame in a straitjacket for weeks at a time, forced to take ice baths and force-fed.

There was no forgiveness at St. Julien," said Ms. Kelly, the youngest of 12 children who was handed over to the nuns by her widowed mother in 1944.

She has filed a charge against the nun who allegedly beat her, whose name is Sister Jeanne Quirion of the Gray Nuns of Montreal. Reached by telephone, Sister Quirion, who is now 73, said, "I do not know Marion Kelly," and hung up.

The orders named in the court actions -- the Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of Mercy, the Gray Nuns of Montreal, the Sisters of Charity of Quebec, the Little Franciscans of Mary, the Brothers of Notre-Dame-de-la-Misericorde and the Brothers of Charity -- have formed a defense committee.

"These allegations are very upsetting and are the focus of all of our attention," said Sister Gisele Fortier, a soft-spoken gray-haired woman belonging to the Little Franciscans of Mary, who speaks for the group. 'Very Much Sensationalized'

Interviewed in a simply furnished room with a crucifix on the wall behind her in a Jesuit-owned building in north Montreal, she insisted the situation had been "very much sensationalized and needs to be put into context."

She said the religious orders had begun a thorough review of the situation in light of the "laws, customs and behavioral standards of the period" and would await the results of a special task force created for that purpose before commenting on the allegations.

Asked specifically about the internment of orphans in mental institutions, she said that was a decision of the doctors involved.

"To think that the individuals that we have helped through some of their most difficult periods in life could have suffered is distressing and touches us deeply," she said.

Photos: Hervé Bertrand, at left in middle row, was among the orphans in this 1955 picture who were declared "mentally deficient" in a move said to have benefitted Quebec and the Roman Catholic Church: the province got large subsidies from Ottawa for building hospitals; it in turn paid the Church more than twice as much for caring for psychiatric patients as for orphans. Mr. Bertrand was 12 at the time.; "At Providence, we were slaves," said Mr. Bertrand, shown outside the Riviere des Prairies in Montreal, formerly the Mont Providence orphanage. "Quebec locked us up and threw away the key. (Horacio Paone for The New York Times)

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