

Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, now-retired prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, is pictured in a Dec. 12, 2022, photo at the Vatican. A civil court in Lorient in France's Brittany region has ruled that a French religious congregation, Cardinal Ouellet and two Vatican-appointed investigators committed "serious misconduct" in expelling Sabine Baudin de la Valette, whose religious name was Sister Marie Ferréol, from her own community "without cause" after 34 years of consecrated life. (CNS/Paul Haring)

François Gloutnay

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

April 9, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A civil court in Lorient in France's Brittany region has ruled that a French religious congregation, Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet — a former high-ranking Vatican official — and two Vatican-appointed investigators committed "serious misconduct" in expelling Sabine Baudin de la Valette, whose religious name was Sister Marie Ferréol, from her own community "without cause" after 34 years of consecrated life.

The religious sister experienced an expulsion described by the court as "infamous and vexatious," without having committed "the slightest offense," and on the basis of "non-established motives," adding she was "sent back to lay life without mercy." The ruling was made public April 3.

The Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit was ordered to pay Sister Marie $36,000 as a "duty of relief." In addition, her congregation, Ouellet and the two apostolic visitors picked by him were jointly ordered to pay her nearly $216,000 for material and moral damages.

"Cardinal Ouellet was found to have committed an abuse of rights and a lack of impartiality," the sister's lawyer, Adeline Le Gouvello, said in a press release.

Sister Marie, 57, was dismissed from her community located in Berné in western France in October 2020, following a visitation that Pope Francis entrusted to Ouellet, according to French Catholic newspaper La Croix. The French Canadian cardinal, who was then prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, named two apostolic visitors. The decision to investigate the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit came after years of tension within the traditionalist community, La Croix reported.

According to the court, "in canon law, as in civil law, anyone claiming to be delegated must prove his delegation," while in the case of investigating the Dominican sisters, "no special mandate from the Pope has been produced, and it was not within the competence of Ouellet — then prefect of the Dicastery for

Bishops — to act with regard to a religious community. The tribunal further notes that none of the acts concerning Sister Marie Ferréol are signed by the Pope, but on the contrary are signed by Ouellet and his secretary."

Advertisement

The French court also said that Ouellet should not have presided over this disciplinary investigation because of his friendship with "one of the sisters of the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit, whose positions were notoriously opposed to those" of Sister Marie.

Dismissed from her community in October 2020 for "bad spirit" by Ouellet (first for three years, then indefinitely), Sister Marie "never knew the facts of which she was allegedly guilty, despite her repeated requests," said Le Gouvello when the religious sister first appeared before the Lorient court.

Ouellet was neither present nor represented by counsel at the hearings held by the French court in 2023 and 2024.

According to La Croix, "the convicted parties have announced that they will appeal today's decision."

In a statement sent to Présence, a French-language religion news outlet based in Montreal, Le Gouvello said that "this decision brings great relief" to the religious sister she represents.

"Justice has been able to objectively note that an injustice had been committed, an abuse of power proven," she said.

According to La Croix, Sister Marie had lived in the traditionalist community of Dominican religious since 1987. But from 2011 onwards, things allegedly deteriorated when she denounced "serious abuses and facts" happening in the community, according to her lawyer.

"This judgment is a very important step towards her rehabilitation. Recognition of the injustice, irregularities and faults committed against her, will enable progress to be made towards a moral rehabilitation and a return to consecrated status within the Church," the lawyer said in a statement sent to Présence.

The Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit have indicated that they will appeal the court's decision.

"This judgment, handed down in a single-judge pleading procedure rather than in a collegial formation, is open to criticism on several counts, and we have instructed our lawyers to lodge an immediate appeal with the Rennes Court of Appeal," said an April 4 statement from the congregation.