

Dear CNWE members and friends,

September 2020

We hope that you are doing well in these challenging times.

**We want to bring an urgent issue to your attention.
We invite your participation in an action for justice in the Catholic Church.
Please take a moment to read the following.**

*A warning that this information raises the issue of clergy sexual abuse of minors.

Irene Deschenes, the survivor at the heart of a decades-long legal battle with the Diocese of London, has accepted the offer of CNWE and friends to support her with a letter writing action. Irene was 10 years old and a member of St. Ursula Catholic School and Parish in Chatham, ON when she was sexually abused by Fr. Charles Sylvestre in the early 1970s.

Irene filed a lawsuit with the Diocese in 1996 and settled out of court in 2000. At that time, the Diocese of London claimed it did not learn of Fr. Sylvestre's sexual abuse of minors until the late 1980's.

In 2006, Fr. Sylvestre pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting 47 girls under the age of 18, including Irene Deschenes. At that time it came to light that the Diocese had received police statements that Fr. Sylvestre had sexually assaulted three girls in 1962, almost a decade before Ms. Deschenes was sexually assaulted. **If the Diocese had acted on this information at the time, the sexual assault of Irene Deschenes and 43 additional girls would have been prevented.**

With this revelation, Ms. Deschenes sought to have her original lawsuit thrown out. A superior court judge ruled in Irene Deschenes' favour but the Diocese of London appealed to the Ontario Court of Appeal. **The Appeal Court also sided with Irene Deschenes in May 2020, saying that there had been significant "misrepresentation" by the Church that impacted the original settlement. The court also said evidence that the Diocese tried to cover up the allegations of sexual abuse is "relevant to the consideration of fairness and justice."**

The Diocese of London has now filed for leave to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, rather than mediate a new settlement with Ms. Deschenes. As Irene Deschenes says: **"It's painful enough to try to recover from the effects of sexual abuse by a Roman Catholic priest; it's even more painful to recover from the effects of legal bullying that the Church and their lawyers put victims through again and again. If we go to mediation, this painful process will be expedited, and I can finally get on with my life."** (The Canadian Press, August 20, 2020)

To support Irene Deschenes **the Catholic Network for Women's Equality is inviting you to write a letter (using the following template) as soon as possible to Bishop Ronald Fabbro, Bishop of London, asking him to enter into mediation for a just and expedited settlement with Irene Deschenes. It is very important that you mark on the outside of the envelope, "Personal and Confidential" to be sure that Bishop Fabbro will personally receive the letter. You are welcome to personalize the letter. We just encourage you to reflect the facts of this letter and its respectful tone.**

For your further information, we have listed in the body of the email, some further links regarding Irene Deschenes' case. If you have any questions about this action, please email admin@cnwe.ca .

We hope you will join with us in supporting Irene Deschenes in calling the Diocese of London to justice.

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CNWE National Work Group