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Pope Francis talks to archbishop of Quebec, Cardinal Gerald LaCroix, as they meet at the Santa Marta residence, at the Vatican, Jan. 30, 2017. A retired Canadian judge said Tuesday, May 21, 2024, that he couldn't find any reliable evidence of sexual misconduct by the archbishop of Quebec, after the purported victim refused to be interviewed and the cardinal strongly denied the claim. (L'Osservatore Romano/Pool Photo via AP)

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A retired Canadian judge said Tuesday he couldn't find any reliable evidence of sexual misconduct by the archbishop of Quebec, after the purported victim refused to cooperate with his investigation and the cardinal strongly denied the claim.

Pope Francis had tasked André Denis, a retired judge of the Superior Court of Québec, to conduct a preliminary investigation for the Catholic Church into claims against Archbishop Gérald Lacroix that surfaced in January.

The allegations were contained in an amended class-action lawsuit filed in Canadian court against 100 current and former church personnel of the archdiocese.

Denis' investigation has no bearing on that lawsuit and concerns only the church's handling of the allegations, since the Vatican has its own procedures to deal with misconduct claims against clergy. The Vatican said Tuesday that based on Denis' report, it planned no canonical trial against Lacroix, 66.

Francis appointed Lacroix a cardinal in 2014, was welcomed by Lacroix during a 2022 visit to Quebec and last year made him a member of his Council of Cardinals, nine top prelates from around the globe who advise him on church matters.

Lacroix had removed himself from day-to-day work at the archdiocese in January, after the allegations were added onto the original 2022 class-action complaint against the archdiocese. The allegations against him date back to 1987 and 1988 and were made by a woman who was 17 at the time, according to the complaint.

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Lacroix strongly denied the claims at the time of his auto-suspension and did so again when interviewed by Denis, the judge said.

"He affirmed with conviction that he never carried out the actions with which he was accused," Denis said. "The elements gathered during the investigation make it implausible that the events associated with the cardinal occurred," Denis told a news conference in Quebec City.

However, Denis also said the alleged victim refused to be interviewed by him to provide her side or to give him access to her court filing. He acknowledged his investigation as a result was incomplete. It is not unheard of for victims to refuse to cooperate with church investigations, especially while civil claims are proceeding.

"I am unable to say whether or not the alleged act took place," Denis said. "I'm even unable to identify a place, an event, a precise date or any other circumstance. The plaintiff's refusal to co-operate in any way with my investigation has left me at a loss."

He said if the purported victim does eventually want to collaborate, he would ask the Vatican to extend his mandate.

The same class-action lawsuit also accused Lacroix's predecessor, Cardinal Marc Ouellet of misconduct, claims he strongly denied. Francis shelved a church trial against Ouellet in 2022 after a priest investigator determined there weren't enough elements to bring forward a canonical trial.

In that case, the priest interviewed the alleged victim by Zoom.

While local dioceses often turn to lay experts to conduct preliminary investigations into abuse or sexual misconduct allegations, it is rare for the Vatican to entrust such an investigation to a non-priest.

In a statement, the archdiocese of Quebec said it welcomed the developments on the canonical investigation but said Lacroix had decided to continue to remain "on the sidelines" of the day-to-day work of the archdiocese until the civil litigation is resolved.

The statement "deplored" the delays in the lawsuit caused by the addition of new defendants and expressed its willingness to negotiate an out-of court settlement.

"On behalf of the Church, we wish to express our sensitivity to the suffering of survivors of sexual abuse and those who are seeking justice and reparation," said Auxiliary Bishop Marc Pelchat, who has temporarily taken over day-to-day running of the archdiocese. "We are determined to contribute to a just settlement."

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