Justice for Irene Network
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January 16, 2021

His Holiness Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Dear Pope Francis,

As members of the "Justice for Irene Network", a group of concerned citizens from across Canada, we respectfully request that you intervene to ask the Bishop of London, Ontario Ronald Peter Fabbro to enter into mediation for a just and expedited settlement with Irene Deschênes.

Irene Deschênes, the survivor at the heart of a decades-long legal battle with the Diocese of London, was 10 years old and a pupil and parishioner at St. Ursula Catholic School and Parish in Chatham, Ontario when she was sexually abused by Fr. Charles Sylvestre in the early 1970's.

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 Deschênes. 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. Deschênes was sexually assaulted. If the Diocese had acted on this information at the time, the sexual assault of Irene Deschênes and 46 additional girls would have been prevented.

With this revelation, Ms. Deschênes sought to have her original lawsuit thrown out. A superior court judge ruled in Irene Deschênes' favour but the Diocese of London appealed to the Ontario Court of Appeal. The Appeal Court also sided with Irene Deschênes 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. Deschênes. As Irene Deschênes 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)

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We hope that as the Catholic Church's spiritual leader, you will call upon Bishop Ronald Fabbro to cancel the Diocese of London's appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada and enter into mediation with Irene Deschênes. We have just learned that the Supreme Court of Canada, in a precedent-setting decision on January 14, 2021 has rejected the appeal from the Archdiocese of St. John's, Newfoundland, regarding the sexual abuse perpetrated by Christian brothers at Mount Cashel orphanage in the 1950's. We ask you, in your capacity as Pope, to intervene on behalf of Irene Deschênes, that she might be able to receive justice from the church and live in peace after all these years.

Since some of our members have written to you in the past and your staff have not acknowledged receipt of our letters, we are sending this letter by registered mail. We ask that you or your staff kindly acknowledge receipt of this letter by email at justiceforirene101@gmail.com by February 19, 2021. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Patricia Grell

Patricia Grell, BSc, MDiv, Secretary, Justice for Irene Network on behalf of:

Advocates for Clergy Trauma Survivors (ACTS), Canada
Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE), Canada
Corey Allison, Executive Director, Women's Rural Resource Centre (WRRC), Strathroy and Area, Ontario
Marie Bouclin, MA, Roman Catholic Women Priests, Sudbury, Ontario
Kenn Bur, Chief Imagination Officer, Citizen Strategies, Edmonton, Alberta
Irene Deschênes, BA, SSW, Strathroy, Ontario
Leona Huggins, B.Mus, M. Ed, Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests (SNAP), Western Canada, Vancouver, BC
Kathleen Kevany, EdD, Associate Professor, Department of Business & Social Sciences, Dalhousie University, CCC (Certified Canadian Counsellor with CCPA), Truro, Nova Scotia
Margaret MacPherson, MA Research Associate, Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University, London Ontario
Nancy N Mayer, MSW, RSW, Toronto, Ontario
Jessie Rodger, MSW, RSW, Executive Director, Anova: A Future Without Violence
Michelle Schryer, Chatham-Kent Sexual Assault Crisis Centre, Chatham, Ontario
Robert Talach LLB, MMM, Beckett Personal Injury Lawyers, London, Ontario
Megan Walker, Executive Director, London Abused Women's Centre, London, Ontario
Shelley Yeo, Anti-Violence activist, London, Ontario

Cc: Thomas Christopher Collins, Cardinal & Archbishop of Toronto
Richard Gagnon, President, CCCB & Archbishop of Winnipeg
Ronald Fabbro, Bishop, Diocese of London