

'Sense of powerlessness' at orphanage

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Published: Apr 11, 2016 at midnight

Updated: Sep 30, 2017 at 6:04 a.m.

Some 60 years ago, two boys without winter coats dragged a cardboard box of meagre belongings through the snow together after being expelled from Mount Cashel.



Barb Sweet/The Telegram

The witness box at Courtroom No. 2, Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Neither spoke to each other about sexual abuse nor could they fathom ever being listened to about it, they told The Telegram outside court Monday in St. John's.

Parting after one stayed with the other's family for a short time, the boys — now men in their late 70s — said they did not speak for decades.

Then they bumped into each other at the police station as a result of the 1989 Hughes Inquiry into the scandal surrounding sexual abuse of a different era of young boys at Mount Cashel — during the 1970s and 1980s.

"I thought he was dead," one man said of the other of that long-ago chance meeting at the station, where neither was privy to what either said to police.

The topic being what it was, they said they avoided each other for some years after, eventually picking up their bond.

The two boys, who were at Mount Cashel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, had become fast friends and allies at the orphanage — culminating, according to civil trial testimony at the Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador last week, in a Boxing Day 1955 expulsion after one boy on Christmas night defended the other — who was grabbed by the throat for being late past curfew due to a blizzard — by hitting Brother Ronald J. Lasik over the head with a chair. They then switched roles, as the boy being helped hit Lasik on the shoulder to protect his rescuer.

Monday, the first witness in the civil trial continued to listen as the fourth witness concluded his evidence — the recounting of his orphanage story under cross-examination by Chris Blom, one of the lawyers representing the Catholic Church.

To save money on hot shower water, boys would be forced by the Christian Brothers into the always frigid orphanage swimming pool with a bar of low-suds-producing Sunlight soap to wash, the fourth witness told the court. He recounted how a Brother dragged him with a rope from the locker room into the pool.

Monday concluded the testimony of the four former residents, who are the test cases in the trial to determine whether the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corp. of St. John's is liable for physical and sexual abuse by some Christian Brothers at the orphanage during the period from the 1940s to 1960s.

Sixty claimants in all are represented by the test cases.

(As well, various other law firms not directly involved in this matter have 20 similar cases in total.)

The church contends it did not run the orphanage and therefore is not liable. It maintains the facility was solely operated by the lay order Christian Brothers.

The trial continues this month, will take a break in May and will resume in June as evidence shifts to experts and others.

Tuesday, claimants' lawyer Geoff Budden plans to apply to Justice Alphonsus Faour to have some Hughes Inquiry testimony allowed, as well as that of a deceased former resident.

Meanwhile, the fourth witness told the court Monday he would hide in the locker room to avoid the swimming pool bathing ritual — usually once a week — and would cry out in anguish over why he was placed in the orphanage and why his father had to die.

He told the court last week his father died in a hit-and-run accident when the witness was a young boy. He was placed in Mount Cashel, and girls in the family were sent to Belvedere orphanage, as their mother had no money.

The witness recalled some boys were whacked on the hands as many as 50 times a day in front of their class, and the worst he saw for harsh discipline at the orphanage was in the period 1946-50.

He also said at night the boys would be whacked on the backside by a Brother or a watchman to get them to get up and go to the toilet.

As he had done with another witness who claimed he reported incidents of sexual abuse to the orphanage-adjacent parish priest in confession, Blom got the witness to concede confession is a sacred and secret process.

The witness had told the court last week he reported three incidents of sexual abuse — two involving an orphanage worker and one involving Brother John Evangelist Murphy — to the priest during confession because he felt guilty for being part of a mortal sin.

Blom spent much of the morning sifting through the man's military records, pointing out factors that led to him not getting further promotion, including hearing difficulties and an easy come, easy go attitude.

But Blom also noted the man had positive comments on his record and was allowed to continue for a few years in the military beyond retirement age in an era (late 1980s to early 1990s) when others in their 40s were being urged to go.

The witness, who like the other three former residents cannot be identified due to a publication ban, said if he waited a few more years, he would have been the longest-serving corporal in Canadian Armed Forces history.

Last week, the man had detailed to Budden some drinking and discipline incidents that he attributed to a chip on his shoulder during his early years in the military. He said he felt they were caused by abuse at Mount Cashel, and that curtailed his achieving a higher rank.

But the witness conceded to Blom Monday that members of the military in general modelled themselves in that era — around the 1950s-'70s — as being hard-working, hard-drinking and hard-fighting.

When Blom asked him about leaving Mount Cashel that long-ago Boxing Day, the witness said there was uncertainty, but also relief.

He said he was indeed angry while at the orphanage.

"My sense of powerlessness, the situation I was in, always being hungry, always being picked on, being scared, intimidated," he said.

He allowed there was also bullying going on and boys had to band together in groups to protect themselves.

After leaving Mount Cashel, he lived for a time with his mother in slums where St. John's City Hall is now — a living situation he conceded to Blom was a "hellhole."

Follow live tweets from the courtroom @bsweettweets and #mountcashelciviltrial and look for coverage today and in Wednesday's print edition.