

Background information on the issue

In 1999 a request was made to the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke by representatives of the Church in response to a request from the family of Fr. Leon Lajoie to allow for his burial in the territory (on the grounds of St. Francis Xavier Mission Church). The Council at the time discussed the matter and approved the request based on Fr. Lajoie's long-standing presence and dedication to the community.

In May of 2021, following the discovery of the remains of 215 children at the Kamloops Residential School, some community members came forward with sexual abuse allegations against Fr. Lajoie. This prompted a petition to be circulated around the community calling for the removal of the remains of Fr. Lajoie from the territory. As soon as the Council of Chiefs became aware of the issues, they began archival research and had discussions on revisiting the decision made by the MCK in 1999 that allowed for the burial of Fr. Lajoie. The petition requesting the removal of the remains of Fr. Lajoie was handed to Chief Ryan Montour on July 25, 2021. There was a formal copy provided at the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke office on July 28, 2021. After the initial discussions with the community group calling for the removal of Fr. Lajoie, as well as concerned parties from the Catholic Church Committee, the Council of Chiefs decided that a community engagement process was still necessary to be undertaken as this issue is a complex one that has come from extraordinary circumstances. The Council of Chiefs believe that the community as a whole should have the opportunity to weigh in on whether the remains of Fr. Lajoie be legally exhumed by an approved entity or, whether to maintain the original decision and allow for the remains to stay undisturbed in the territory.

A formal investigation into the allegations of sexual abuse by Fr. Leon Lajoie began on Wednesday, November 3, 2021, in the community. Please note that regardless of the outcome of the investigation, the input of the community will be paramount in the decision.

Timeline of events of MCK involvement

July 15, 2021 – The Council of Chiefs and St-Kateri Shrine Saint Francis Xavier Mission were copied on a letter from a group of community members, signed by a delegated spokesperson, to Bishop Claude Hamelin which was a follow up to a letter sent on June 27, 2021 asking for the removal of Fr. Lajoie from the territory. The letter indicates "Since we have not heard back from any parties addressed, the People have held another meeting to discuss the next steps according to the Kaianerekowa. Adhering to the processes of our People it was agreed that August 1, 2021, at 9am would be the deadline for Leon Lajoie's remains to be removed from the territory by the Jesuit Order and Diocese of St-Jean-Longueuil"

July 16, 2021 - Council Chiefs Ryan Montour, Ross Montour, Lindsay Leborgne, Jessica Lazare, Arnold Boyer and Tonya Perron informally met with Fr. Vincent at the Church to hear his perspective on what was going on. He expressed that the Church takes these allegations seriously and that proper procedures would need to be followed, such as an official complaint to launch an investigative process into the allegations. He asked that the Council of Chiefs get in contact with the Church Administration Committee in order to speak to the community group to initiate dialogue.

July 18, 2021 - Grand Chief Sky-Deer and Chief Ryan Montour met with two community members who were a part of the community group. The purpose was to hear their position concerning the issue, as there was an initial threat made via Facebook for the remains to be dug up and thrown into the Seaway.

The community group was then demanding that the body of Fr. Lajoie be exhumed in an expedited manner with a deadline of August 1, 2021. There was a request made by the Council members in attendance for an extension to the deadline of August 1, 2021 in order to facilitate more dialogue with all parties. After the two community members consulted with the women of the community group, the request was denied.

July 21, 2021 - The Grand Chief along with Council Chiefs Jessica Lazare and Cody Diabo met with the Church Committee to begin dialogue on the subject.

July 25, 2021 - The Grand Chief, Council Chiefs Ryan Montour, Cody Diabo, Arnold Boyer, Ross Montour and the Chief Political Advisor Winona Polson Lahache, met with the community group in front of the St. Francis Xavier Mission to discuss their views and concerns. The group was adamant about the deadline of August 1, 2021, however, the position of the Council of Chiefs was that further engagement and dialogue is needed before any decision can be undertaken.

July 25, 2021 - Council Chief Ryan Montour attended the peoples fire near the Pow Wow grounds at 6:00 pm to make another request to the community group for a 30-day extension. He also suggested that they write a letter with their concerns and submit it to the MCK office. He was then presented with a petition for the removal of the remains of Fr. Lajoie. Chief Ryan Montour explained that the main concern was the need to treat the remains properly and with respect. He also expressed that more time was required for continued dialogue within the community, as well as with other parties including the Jesuits of Canada and the Bishop. The community group agreed to the extension and the new date provided was August 22, 2021, for the remains of Fr. Lajoie to be removed from the territory.

July 27, 2021 – The Grand Chief received an email letter from the Jesuits of Canada Provincial Superior Fr. Erik Oland with a subject line of Sexual Abuse Complaint re: Fr. Leon Lajoie, S-J. “We have appointed our Delegate for Conduct to undertake an investigation into this matter and to liaise with the parish and community about the future steps. His name is William Blakeney - We will fully cooperate to reach the truth in this matter and work towards reconciliation and healing if harm has occurred. We recognize that this is a situation that will only achieve closure with community consultation”.

July 28, 2021 – The Council office formally received the petition. It reads Petition for the Removal of Father Leon Lajoie From Kahnawake “Be it resolved that on this 27th day of June 2021, the victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by Father Leon Lajoie, formally demand his immediate removal from the Kahnawake Kanienkehaka Territory. His presence within Kahnawake hinders those victims from being able to cope and heal from their traumas when passing by his resting place. In the spirit of truth and reconciliation, healing and a peaceful path forward we kindly ask those who support these victims to please sign this petition so that the healing process may begin. Nia:wen.” The petition has 202 signatures.

July 28, 2021 – The Council received a letter from the delegated spokesperson of the community group confirming “This brings the new deadline for action to August 22, 2021. The People remain available and will continue to remain outside of the St-Francis Xavier Mission every Sunday from 9am until the afternoon for dialogue - The People have assembled and have agreed to an extension of time to allow for peace and a proper handling of this situation to unfold. Keep in mind the process the People are taking is in accordance with the Kaianerekowa”.

July 28, 2021 – The Council received a letter from the St-Kateri Shrine Saint Francis Xavier Mission expressing “Our Congregation has been under tremendous stress, especially our elder members in dealing with acts of vandalism against our church, threats made to burn and tear the church down, threats made to force us out of the community for services, misinformation about removing the shoes and about our handling of the complaint, threats and ultimatums of disrespectful exhumation of the priest, the group intentionally gathering during church service intimidating the Congregation”. They further explained “Upon receipt of the complaint, we brought it to the Diocese as we were advised there is a protocol and process to handle these complaints. A formal investigation is being conducted by the Jesuit Order; they have advised us they will share the progress of the investigation with us. We do not know how long this takes, the process and how the final report is shared. As we are provided with information, we will share with your office”.

August 1, 2021 – Council Chiefs Ryan Montour and Arnold Boyer were requested to engage with the community group in front of the church at their request.

August 8, 2021 - Council Chief Arnold Boyer met with the community group as they had concerns that there was no progress on the dialogue that was to be occurring. They wanted the Bishop to come outside to discuss issues with them and to hear their stories.

August 11 ,2021 - The Grand Chief and Chief Tonya Perron had a Zoom call with Mr. William Blakeney - Delegate for Conduct for the Jesuits of Canada to discuss what his role and involvement would be in trying to resolve this issue in our community, who would be responsible for an investigation and if they would come and meet with the community group to hear their allegations. It was agreed that they would send representatives to the community on August 22, 2021.

August 15, 2021 - Council Chiefs Tonya Perron, Arnold Boyer, Lindsay Leborgne, Ryan Montour and the Chief Political Advisor Winona Polson Lahache met with the community group in front of the Church in order to advise on the steps that Council had taken up to this point. They were also informed that William Blakeney would be in the community on August 22, 2021, to meet with the community group and the MCK.

August 15, 2021 - The Grand Chief, Council Chiefs Lindsay Leborgne, Alan John Rice, Jessica Lazare, Cody Diabo, Barton Goodleaf, Arnold Boyer, Tonya Perron and Ryan Montour attended the people’s fire at 6:00 pm on the Island to continue dialogue and to request more time as the Jesuit representatives were to be in the community the following week to meet with the community group and to intake allegations.

August 16, 2021 - At a duly convened Council meeting the Council of Chiefs discussed and deliberated on the matter. The consensus was that further engagement with Kahnawa’kehró:non is necessary before a decision can be made. The Council has a responsibility to ensure that this is done properly and that it is not a rushed process. It will also give community members an opportunity to come forward with their stories. The Council agreed to develop an engagement process that would be communicated to the community.

August 22, 2021 – A meeting took place between Mr. William Blakeney, Delegate for Conduct for the Jesuits of Canada, the National Provincial Fr. Erik Oland, representatives of the MCK and the community group who had been gathering in front of the Catholic Church. This took place inside of the Kateri Hall. During the meeting, the community group requested that the MCK Council members in attendance leave the meeting in order to allow individuals to share their allegations against Fr. Leon Lajoie.

August 22, 2021- Representatives from the Council of Chiefs attended the people's fire at 6:00 pm on the Island where this issue was discussed further. The Council maintained that it would be continuing with the Community Engagement process.

August 24, 2021 - A debriefing meeting took place between Mr. William Blakeney and the Grand Chief regarding the state of affairs in the community. He advised that if the decision was made to exhume the remains of Fr. Lajoie, that the Jesuits would arrange for the repatriation and that the legal expenses and costs would be borne by the Jesuits of Canada and not the Community. He confirmed that under ordinary circumstances, Fr. Lajoie would have been buried at the cemetery at St. Jerome. The Jesuits and the Diocese would agree if the Community and Church Administration Committee wished for this to take place or if it was ordered by the MCK.

August 29, 2021 - Chiefs Alan John Rice and Arnold Boyer met with the Congregation of the St. Francis Xavier Mission to discuss the informal proposal by the Jesuits of Canada. The discussion was on the process to remove the remains of Fr. Lajoie from the territory and to bring them to St. Jerome with the other Jesuit Priests. At the time, this was not an official offer from the Jesuits in writing, but a proposed option to consider. The Congregation was not supportive of the proposal, as they wanted an investigation to proceed.

September 15, 2021 – The Grand Chief and Chiefs Arnold Boyer and Alan John Rice met with the Church Administration Committee. The Church Committee expressed that they felt there was lack of communication between the MCK and Mr. William Blakeney in terms of next steps. It was agreed to have more inclusive dialogue.

September 20, 2021 – Chief Arnold Boyer gave an update to the Council of Chiefs and a discussion ensued regarding the community engagement process. A background and timeline document were to be developed along with a short questionnaire to seek direction from the community on the issue.

October 14 and 19, 2021 - Meetings between the representatives from the MCK, Church Administration Committee, Mr. William Blakeney and the appointed investigator occurred. Introductions are made to Brian King (Appointed Investigator). He confirmed that he will be in the community on the week of November 1, 2021, to commence the official investigation. He requested a tour of the church and assistance with any supports needed to conduct his work, i.e., location to meet with community members and KSCS supports for them if needed. It was agreed that the Jesuits would make a formal request to St. Francis Xavier Parish to have Fr. Lajoie repatriated to St. Jerome in accordance with Canon law and their own traditions.

October 18, 2021 - There was an update to the Council of Chiefs regarding the meeting that was held with the Church Administration Committee, Mr. William Blakeney and Mr. Brian King . It was stated that that the Investigation would be forthcoming and a notice to the community would have to be developed. It was agreed to finalize the next community engagement process solely on the issue of the remains of Fr. Lajoie.

October 25, 2021 – The Council of Chiefs agreed to the dates of November 9 and 14, 2021 to hold the engagement sessions and a Press Release would be required to inform the community with an attached timeline to give context to the breadth of the meetings and discussions that have taken place to try to resolve the matter. The Grand Chief made a commitment to reach out to the parties involved, the

Church Congregation and the community group to explain the next steps and processes that will be forthcoming.

October 31, 2021 – The Grand Chief and Chiefs Tonya Perron, Arnold Boyer and Barton Goodleaf attended the Church after their morning service to explain to the Congregation the next steps.

*The community group declined an in-person update.

November 3, 2021 – A formal investigation into the sexual abuse allegations against Fr. Lajoie commenced in the community. The King International Advisory Group has been commissioned by the Jesuits of Canada to do this undertaking with Mr. Brian King as the lead investigator.