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Three things to understand about the Legionaries of Christ

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 20, 2008 All Things Catholic

Last week I published a lengthy, and remarkably candid, interview with Archbishop Edwin O?Brien of Baltimore about a set of directives he?s issued for the Legionaries of Christ and their lay movement, Regnum Christi. Specifically, O?Brien demanded an accounting of all personnel and activities in his archdiocese from both groups, and he barred Legionaries and Regnum Christi members from one-on-one spiritual counseling with anyone under 18.

In our interview, O?Brien had some tough things to say, including his fear that the problems he sees in both groups are so ?endemic? as to be essentially beyond correction. O?Brien said he hopes he?s wrong, but revealed that he had walked up to the brink of expelling the Legionaries and Regnum Christi from the archdiocese altogether, only to pull back after three Vatican cardinals asked him to give them another chance.

The full text of that interview can be found here: Baltimore archbishop demands greater accountability from religious order [1].

In the meantime, the Legionaries have issued a statement on O?Brien?s directives. Here is the full text of the statement, which comes from Communications Director Jim Fair:

> *?Father Alvaro Corcuera [Superior of the Legion of Christ] met June 6 with Archbishop Edwin O?Brien. They had a fruitful and substantive discussion that laid down the groundwork for the Legion?s continued ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. They were able to clarify issues and came up with concrete points that we will work on. We would hope that all Regnum Christi members will also see this as an occasion to love and serve the Church.*
>
> ?We look forward to supporting the Archbishop?s efforts to spread the Gospel in this great and historic Archdiocese. We pray for Archbishop O?Brien and Fr Alvaro that the Lord may bless them abundantly for the tremendous leadership they give to us. As you can see from the archbishop?s published letter, there have been serious issues regarding the Legion?s work. We are grateful for the opportunity to address these matters.?

Since my interview with O?Brien appeared, I?ve had a high volume of responses, much of it from people who long ago made up their minds about the Legionaries. There were, however, a number of other reactions that weren?t quite so according-to-script. One prominent American Catholic commentator, for example, who has a number of friends in the Legion of Christ, called to say that he hopes the O?Brien interview will ?jar loose? what he sees as a taboo within the group concerning discussion of charges of sexual abuse leveled against the late founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

For the record, those charges were widely publicized in the 1990s, and the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith opened an investigation in 1998. In 2006, the Vatican released a communiqué stating that on the basis of that inquest, it had decided to invite Maciel ?to a reserved life of prayer and penance, renouncing every public ministry.? Many observers took the decision as tantamount to a finding of guilt.

Here?s what O?Brien told me about the response within the Legionaries to the charges against Maciel: ?They really have to face it. They need to be able to say, ?The evidence seems to be that this man engaged in some activities that were less than honorable, and maybe even sinful.? ? Without facing that, I think it casts a pall over any other objectivity, any other integrity, they claim to put forth as their qualifications to deal with lay people and with the Catholic church in general.?

What?s new in O?Brien?s case, as well as the commentator mentioned above, is that the drumbeat is coming not from liberal Catholics hostile to the Legionaries on ideological or theological grounds, or from veteran activists on the sexual abuse issue, but rather from figures who otherwise think of themselves as friends of the Legion.

All this prompts a question that may seem obvious particularly to Americans, in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis: As so many dioceses and orders have been forced to do, why don?t the Legionaries simply take the hit and move on?

For the Legionaries themselves, undoubtedly the largest single reason is also the simplest: many don?t believe the charges are true. They see the Vatican?s action as a tragic mistake, which they pray will be rectified with time. Critics of the Legion, on the other hand, often suggest that structures of secrecy and deceit in the order run so deep as to make an honest accounting of Maciel?s past virtually impossible.

Without entering into that debate, it?s important to observe that the truth or falsehood of the charges is almost certainly not the only variable shaping the Legionary response. There are at least three other factors that cannot help but affect how the Legion, or any group facing a similar crisis, might react. To understand those forces is an important step towards understanding why things happen as they do in the church.

1. **The centrality of the founder:** The Vatican?s communiqué two years ago took pains to distinguish its conclusion about Maciel from any indictment of the Legionaries as a whole: ?Independently of the person of the founder,? it said, ?the worthy apostolate of the Legionaries of Christ and the Regnum Christi Association is recognized with gratitude.? Many Legionaries and other experts on religious life, however, warn that things aren?t that simple. The identity and spirituality of a religious order is deeply tied to the personality of its founder, and there aren?t many ready examples of orders which have flourished despite compelling evidence of moral corruption on the part of the founder. To acknowledge merit to the charges against Maciel, at least in the eyes of some, would therefore be tantamount to jeopardizing the viability of the communities he founded. It could also, of course, jeopardize the vocations of Legionaries intensely devoted to the figure of Maciel.

2. **Mixed signals from the Vatican:** Prior to the action from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith two years ago, there were clear divisions in the Vatican about how to proceed in the Maciel case, and those divisions have not disappeared. Last March, Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Religious, celebrated Mass for the Legionaries on the anniversary of Maciel?s birth. In his homily, Rodé praised the ?genius? of Maciel, saying that he was one of the few figures after the Second Vatican Council who managed to avoid the ?traps of secularization.? Rodé urged the Legionaries to ?walk in the footsteps of Father Maciel, who loved the Church, who loved the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe: how can we not name her on this occasion! He loved the Pope.? Such language hardly suggests to many Legionaries or Regnum Christi members that some senior figures in the

Vatican regard ?coming to grips? with the charges against Maciel as an urgent priority.

3. **Accusations of a cover-up:** As painful as it would be for members of the Legionaries or Regnum Christi to accept that Maciel was guilty, doing so might actually prove less problematic in the long run than dealing with the fallout from such an admission. Many observers contend that if the charges against Maciel are true, it strains credibility to believe that no one else in the Legion of Christ knew about what was happening. Inevitably, therefore, to admit Maciel?s guilt would be to invite awkward questions about who was aware of his behavior, and what their role may have been in either facilitating it or covering it up. Such questions would be especially explosive given that some of Maciel?s closest friends and aides, who would be the most obvious targets of those questions, now occupy positions of leadership in the Legion of Christ.

Given the cumulative impact of these factors, it?s likely that the Legionaries would struggle to face the charges against Maciel under any circumstances -- even if their truth were established beyond all doubt. As I noted above, this is an insight with broader applications than just the Legionaries or the Maciel case.

Perhaps as proof of the point, so far the O?Brien interview does not seem to have dislodged the taboo these forces help to sustain. After I received the statement quoted above from Fair, the communications director, I asked if the Legion wished to respond to O?Brien?s statements about the issues surrounding the founder.

His answer: ?We don?t have any further comment on the charges about Father Maciel.?

* * *

Last week?s column was devoted to the spring meeting of the U.S. bishops in Orlando. Among other things, I touched upon a behind-the-scenes discussion concerning materials on HIV/AIDS prevention prepared by Catholic Relief Services, the official overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. bishops.

Recently, noted Catholic ethicist Germain Grisez charged that those materials promote the use of condoms. I reported that the Committees on Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities of the bishops? conference have completed a review of the CRS materials, which will be sent to Archbishop Timothy Dolan of Milwaukee, chair of the CRS board.

That item brought the following clarification from John Rivera of CRS, which I?m happy to pass along:

?Your report on Dr. Grisez? critique of CRS? HIV educational materials was essentially correct. I?d just like to clarify one matter. It was CRS who proactively requested that our documents be reviewed by the Committees on Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities. They did not independently initiate the review. As you accurately reported, we will take any necessary action based on the results of that review.?

* * *

When I file my weekly column with the home office at *NCR*, I slug them in the following manner: ?Allen.ATC.1,? with the number changing each time. That?s how I know that this week?s entry is the 100th column since its name changed from ?The Word from Rome? to ?All Things Catholic? in 2006, in tandem with my shift from being stationed full-time in Rome to dividing my time between the Eternal City and the United States.

My thanks go to all those readers who have made this milestone possible.

Since this week marks an anniversary of sorts, it?s perhaps a good time to share one bit of news regarding my

latest GPS coordinates. For the last two years, my American base has been in New York. In July, however, my wife Shannon and I are moving to Denver, allowing us to be closer to both my family (in western Kansas) and hers (in Arizona).

In journalistic terms, readers of ?All Things Catholic? probably won?t notice any difference. I?ll maintain my base in Rome in order to keep an eye on the Vatican, and as always, much of the rest of my reporting will come from travelling the highways and byways of the Catholic world. In practical terms, however, the move to Denver allows us to do something that?s virtually impossible in today?s real estate market in the Big Apple, which is to buy a house.

My e-mail address will remain the same after the move, and this time around there?s no need to revise the name of the column -- so look for the 101st ?All Things Catholic? to roll out next week as usual.

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