

EDITORIAL: Of Legionnaires, Lefebvrites and the good sisters

NCR Editorial Staff | Feb. 18, 2009



(Pat Marrin)

George Orwell, as is often the case, said it best. "To see what is front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

Case One: Confirmation that the founder of the Legion of Christ, Fr. Marciel Maciel Degollado, was not only a child molester and cultish leader of a church-within-a-church, but a scoundrel (he apparently also stole a lot of money) and a cad.

While the specific allegations that came to light earlier this month -- that Maciel had at least one mistress and fathered at least one child (the depth of his heterosexual dalliances are as yet still unacknowledged by the Legion) -- were revealing, and perhaps even surprising, they were hardly shocking. Readers of this paper, thanks to the tireless work of journalists Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, knew long ago the true nature of the Legionnaires' corrupt charism. Some of those, both inside and outside the Legion, who chose to defend Maciel (and in their spare time defame Berry, Renner and this newspaper), now offer regrets. Many innocent people trapped in the bizarre Legion culture, or devoid of skepticism because of Pope John Paul II's enthusiastic endorsement of the twisted founder, were deceived. Their apologies are, of course, accepted.

Others, however, who were publicly supportive of Maciel now call for a Vatican investigation of the order. They are shocked, shocked, at what has been recently revealed -- though any reservations they might have had were never previously voiced. Still, they are correct. An investigation is certainly called for, and if the obvious

is discovered, that the Legion is, at its core, a warped endeavor, then disavowal (?suppression? in ecclesial terms) would seem to be in order. Whatever the case, this will take years to sort out.

Case Two: Lefebvrite bishop Richard Williamson, he of Holocaust-denying infamy. It strains credulity to imagine that the Vatican officials charged with negotiating the return of the Society of St. Pius X to the church fold did not know of the virulent anti-Semitic strain that flows through the society like water down a stream. There are really only two possibilities: that Vatican officials did know they were dealing with wacko Holocaust deniers, in which case they are now lying about their culpability; or they really were ignorant, which, in the age of Google, means they are incompetent.

Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican communications apparatus, such as it is, are struggling mightily to contain this crisis. The pope has repudiated the Holocaust deniers and is scheduled to visit Israel in May. Meanwhile, Williamson, God help us, reports that he will conduct his own investigation into the Holocaust, as if there are significant essential questions about the Nazi extermination program that have yet to be answered. Like the Legion of Christ, the Lefebvrite controversy offers yet another example of the danger of treating the lunatic fringe like lost sheep. Better that they find their own twisted path.

And, finally, Case Three: Let's investigate the sisters. Promises of ?transparency? related to the Vatican's ?apostolic visitation? of women's apostolic communities in the United States have been made (see story, Page 1). This ranks, in American terms, with the old saw of ?I'm with the government and I'm here to help.?

As we report in this issue, ?leaders among American women's congregations who travel regularly to Rome to meet with Vatican officials,? including Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the office that ordered the visitation, ?say that not once in their conversations did anyone offer a hint that a visitation might be in the works.?

As is obvious to all with eyes, U.S. women's religious communities face many challenges; equally evident is that they are among the American church's healthiest charisms, reinventing themselves to carry out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in new and innovative ways. We pray that this ?visitation? will be a positive and enriching experience for the sisters involved, for the Vatican officials responsible for the investigation, and for the U.S. church.

We pray, yes, but we have strong doubts. There is a stench, something malodorous about the whole process. That much is clear.

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