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Vatican orders visitation of Legionaries of Christ

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Mar. 31, 2009

Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, leads students in taking an oath at a Legion of Christ school in Ireland in this circa 1962 photo. (CNS)

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican has ordered an apostolic visitation of the institutions of the Legionaries of Christ following disclosures of sexual impropriety by the order's late founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.
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tThe announcement of the unusual investigation was posted on the Web site of the Legionaries of Christ March 31, along with the text of a letter informing the Legionaries of the pope's decision.

The letter, written by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, said the pope wanted to help the Legionaries of Christ deal with its present problems with "truth and transparency." It said the visitation would be carried out by "a team of prelates," who were not identified.
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tApostolic visitation is a form of internal church investigation ordered by a pope and undertaken by his delegate or delegates. The pope sets the jurisdiction and powers of the visitation, which usually ends with the submission of a report to the Holy See.
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tIn February, Legionaries of Christ officials in Rome disclosed that Fr.Maciel had fathered a child. Sources in Rome said the order was also looking into accusations of financial irregularities by Fr.Maciel.
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tIn the past, Fr. Maciel had been accused of sexually abusing young seminarians in the order. After investigating those allegations, the Vatican in 2006 told Fr. Maciel to renounce public ministry as a priest and spend the rest of his life in prayer and penitence; the Vatican did not, however, confirm that sexual abuse had occurred.
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tFr. Maciel died Jan. 30, 2008, at the age of 87.
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tCardinal Bertone's one-page letter, dated March 10, was addressed to Fr. Alvaro Corcuera, director general of the Legionaries and its lay association, Regnum Christi.

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t"The Holy Father is aware of the noble ideals that inspire you and the fortitude and prayerful spirit with which you are facing the current vicissitudes, and he encourages you to continue seeking the good of the church and society by means of your own distinctive initiatives and institutions," the cardinal's letter said.
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t"In this regard, you can always count on the help of the Holy See, so that with truth and transparency, in a climate of fraternal and constructive dialogue, you will overcome the present difficulties. In this respect, the Holy Father has decided to carry out an apostolic visitation to the institutions of the Legionaries of Christ through a team of prelates," it said.
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tDetails of the visitation were not made public in the announcement. Jim Fair, the order's U.S. spokesman, said the order knew little more than what the letter stated.

t"We know they're going to be visiting. We'll cooperate and prepare. But all we know is what's on the site," Fair told Catholic News Service.

Update

Father Corcuera said in an online statement that the visitation "is the beginning of a process in which the Legion will fully and gratefully participate." He said it would begin after Easter and would probably last several months.

"We are ready to welcome the visitators to our centers and institutions with faith and supernatural spirit, cooperating with them and facilitating their mission," he said.

In a letter to Legionaries posted on the site, Father Corcuera said he had thanked Pope Benedict "from my heart for offering us this additional help to face our present vicissitudes related to the grave facts of our founder's life."

Referring to the accusations of sexual abuse investigated in 2006 and the more recent disclosures, Father Corcuera said: "We are deeply saddened and sorry, and we sincerely ask for forgiveness from God and from those who have been hurt through this."

U.S. Legionaries Father Thomas D. Williams said the apostolic visitation was a necessary and welcome step, one that can restore confidence and credibility for the future.

"I think you absolutely need a reconfirmation by the church that (the Legionaries of Christ) is something that is good, that is a work of God, and that this has to go on, and not the contrary," said Father Williams, who teaches at the Legionaries' Pontifical Regina Apostolorum University in Rome.

He said he expected the visitation to examine to what extent a religious charism based on Father Maciel's teachings was still viable.

"I don't think anyone sees this crystal clearly right now. I think we need help in sifting through our own present and future," he said.

"Honestly, speaking for my confreres and myself, if it's not a work of God, nobody wants to be a part of it. I certainly don't. And if it is, we want to know what we're supposed to be taking from this original charism and what we're not," he said.

Father Williams said this is where the Vatican's task of discernment will be crucial.

He said that in recent weeks Father Corcuera had met with Vatican officials and then with Pope Benedict, making clear that the Legionaries wanted some kind of outside intervention to help clear up doubts.

Sources said several papal delegates would carry out the visitation, and that it would be done by geographical area: Italy and Europe, Mexico and South America, and North America. The delegates were expected to be named soon.

When the latest revelations about Father Maciel having fathered a daughter were made public in early February, Legionaries of Christ officials expressed their shock and sadness, and said the order was dealing with it "as a family."

At that time, Father Paolo Scarafoni, spokesman at the Legionaries' headquarters in Rome, spoke of a "process of purification" within the order. He made clear, however, that Father Maciel would still remain the guiding influence in the order.

"Our gratitude to him remains very strong because we have received so much that is good from him. This is something we cannot and will not deny," Father Scarafoni said.

Several prominent Catholic commentators said publicly -- and some Vatican officials said privately -- that the situation called for an outside investigation into the Legionaries of Christ, in order to ascertain the truth, determine whether officials of the order covered up Father Maciel's misconduct and judge whether Father Maciel's teachings could still inspire the order.

Several Vatican officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the effectiveness of an apostolic visitation would depend in large part on cooperation by Legionaries of Christ leadership.

Father Maciel was the subject of a major canonical investigation by the Vatican from 1957 to 1959. He was suspended as the order's superior during that time, but was reinstated when the investigation ended. (Contributing to this story was Dennis Sadowski in Washington.

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