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A rare, frank assessment from a Legionary insider

Tom Roberts | Jul. 13, 2009 NCR Today

The Vatican investigation of the Legionaries of Christ is about to begin, perhaps a sign that the long legacy of deception and abuse by the Legion's founder, the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, is coming to an end. One of the people who should be on the list of interviewees is Fr. Thomas Berg, a former Legion priest who offers a rare and frank behind-the-scenes understanding of the order's problems and what is needed to move on from the Maciel era.

One thing he recommends is that the order quickly and completely distance itself from the founder, remove his still numerous likenesses from the walls of the order's houses and institutions and come to terms, finally, with the depth of the damage he caused.

Maciel's deceptions, as has been amply chronicled in NCR's pages for years, went to the highest levels of the church. He was a favorite of the late Pope John Paul II, who largely ignored the complaints of some of Maciel's alleged victims and the better judgment, we now know, of some within the curia who believed his case should have been investigated years ago.

Five bishops, including Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, have been given the task of investigating the Legion. On June 27, according o a story today on Chiesa.expressonline [1], the five bishops were briefed by Cardinals Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of state, and William J. Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctine of the Faith and Franc Rode, prefect of the congregation for Institutes of Religious Life.

"At the meeting, the five were read the conclusions of the Vatican investigation that led in 2006 to the condemnation" of Maciel, according to the article. Actually, it was less than a condemnation, but rather an order that Maciel spend the rest of his life out of the limelight and in prayer and penance. Maciel died in 2008, after which it was discovered that he had also fathered a daughter.

The Chiesa piece features an interview by Italian journalist Sandro Magister with former Legionary priest Fr. Thomas Berg, described as a member of the order since 1968, a priest since 2000, who left the congregation in April to be incardinated into the Archdiocese of New York.

He provides, as he had in the recent past, some rare honest appraisal of the order, of what went wrong, of the distortions of religious life that he observed, of what can be salvaged and what is required to move the order into the future on a healthy and sound footing.

Below are some excerpts from the interview. The entire interview can be accessed at the link above.

Q: What would be your suggestions to the five visitors?

A: I will limit myself to one overall suggestion: help the Legionaries to engage in an honest and objective self-critique. What I have found most unsettling of late is the kind of group-think that has settled in among the Legionaries: "We really don't think there is anything wrong with the internal culture of the Legion, but if the

Holy See tells us to change things, we will." The docility to the Holy See, though laudable and correct, masks a huge internal flaw: the Legion's corporate inability to engage in a healthy self-critique. This is no time for a business as usual approach, but that has been the impression one generally gets from the Legionaries over the past five months of the crisis.

That inability to see and honestly recognize the flaws and errors that so many people outside the Legion are able to see speaks volumes. The Legionaries should be reminded that it is not the task of the Holy See to reform the Legion. The Legion will only be genuinely reformed when it reforms itself from within. But that can only begin with a self-examination that arises from within the Legion and owns up to the Legion's errors.

Q: What are the issues you think should change in the internal culture of the Legion, especially related to the recently suppressed "vow of charity", meaning the vow not to criticize one's superiors?

A: At the core of serious problems in the internal culture of the congregation is a mistaken understanding and living of the theological principle - in itself valid - that God's will is made manifest to the religious through his superior. The Legionary seminarian is erroneously led to foster a hyper-focusing on internal "dependence" on the superior for virtually every one of his intentional acts (either explicitly or in virtue of some norm or permission received, or presumed or habitual permissions). This is not in harmony with the tradition of religious life in the Church, nor is it theologically or psychologically sound. It entails rather an unhealthy suppression of personal freedom (which is a far cry from the reasoned, discerned and freely exercised oblation of mind and will that the Holy Spirit genuinely inspires in the institution of religious obedience) and occasions unholy and unhealthy restrictions on personal conscience.

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Links:
[1] http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1339296?eng=y