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Berry's latest on Legion investigation

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I don?t know whether the bishops assigned to investigate the Legionaries of Christ plan to interview Jason Berry, one of the writers who originally broke the story about the secretive order and its founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, but he ought to be on their ?must see? list.

Berry, a freelance writer, and the late Gerald Renner, who at the time worked as a religion writer for the Hartford Courant in Connecticut, were the first to detail allegations of sexual abuse of young seminarians(a number pre-teen) by Maciel. The allegations came from priests and former priests and seminarians, nine in all, who had belonged to the order. Two of the priests had been entrusted with helping to establish the Legion in the United States. That story appeared in 1997.

A dozen years later, as the self-constructed façade of sanctity that had surrounded Maciel for decades is finally crumbling, people in the order who once shunned the press are talking, albeit anonymously, with Berry. His latest report [1] on the matter from Rome, done for globalpost.com, updates the situation in the Legion in interviews with priests dismayed at how little of the full story of Maciel is known or discussed within the order, particularly among seminarians.

According to the interviews, the email and other correspondence of seminarians is still screened, and two years after Maciel was disciplined by the pope, the order?s founder is still spoken about as a saint and his writings are still avidly read.

Berry also paints a picture through the interviews of essentially a program of gifts to influential curia members for a kind of political patronage. Some of those treasured contacts, such as Cardinal Franc Rode, who oversees religious congregations, continue to defend the order. That sets up a rather bizarre circumstance in which Rode, who heads one of the Vatican congregations overseeing the investigation of U.S. nuns (who, to my knowledge, have yet to cause any major scandal to the church) is out touting the virtues of an order whose founder was repeatedly accused of abusing youngsters and who fathered a daughter in Spain.

In the past, Berry has been vilified for his reporting by spokesmen for the order and by influential voices on the Catholic right, particularly the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. They characterized the stories as fiction, tales made up by those who were conspiring in some sort of vendetta against Maciel. After all, he was a favorite of John Paul II, who in 1994 referred to Maciel as an ?efficacious leader of youth.? Maciel traveled with the pope on several occasions and was known to have the favor of John Paul II, who ignored letters from former and active Legion priests and at least one U.S. bishop detailing charges of abuse, as well as the pleas of victims to investigate the Legion.

It?s time to stop beating up the messenger. I don?t advocate journalists become participants in investigations, but it doesn?t seem out of place to suggest that one of the bishops might read all of the material he?s written ? it?s the best public record we?ve got of what went on. And someone might even invite him out for a beer and an informal chat. He knows the terrain.

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[1] http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/italy/090717/vatican-investigates-legionaries-christ