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More abuse allegations against Maciel surface

by David Agren by Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY -- Many in Mexico -- and beyond -- know Father Marcial Maciel as the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, an influential Catholic order famed for its elite schools and well-heeled followers.

Blanca Estela Lara Gutierrez came to know him in Tijuana by the alias "Raul Rivas," who, she said, "wanted to have a family" and, at various times, masqueraded as either a private detective or a CIA agent.

Her three sons, Jose Raul, Omar and Cristian, came to know Father Maciel as "Dad."

On March 3, the family went public with unflattering details of their life with Father Maciel. Lara told Mexico City radio host Carmen Aristegui of MVS Radio that she and Father Maciel were a couple for some 25 years and raised three sons -- one of whom, Cristian, was not his biological child. Jose Raul and Omar, meanwhile, tearfully said they had been sexually abused by their dad, Father Maciel.

The allegations threaten to further cloud the legacy of Father Maciel, who founded one of the most successful Catholic orders of the 20th century and gained enormous respect among Catholics worldwide, but lived a double life in violation of church teaching.

After an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse against Father Maciel, the Vatican in May 2006 ordered him to stop practicing his ministry in public and live a life of prayer and penitence. Father Maciel died in January 2008 at age 87. Barely a year later, the Legionaries acknowledged its founder had fathered a daughter.

The latest revelations of impropriety come as a five-member apostolic visitation team investigates the Legionaries of Christ.

Jose Raul Gonzalez Lara -- he and his brothers were not given Father Maciel's family name -- dismissed a

recent public apology by Father Evaristo Sada, general secretary of the Legionaries, as "very embarrassing."

On Feb. 22, Father Sada asked for forgiveness "from the persons that our founder has affected because of immoral acts in his personal life." He also called on Legionaries to become more "humble" in their behavior and attitudes.

The Legionaries in Mexico responded March 4 by releasing a Jan. 12 letter from Father Carlos Skertchly, the order's general procurator, to Jose Raul. The order said releasing the letter was done "with absolute respect for the person of Raul Gonzalez Lara, bearing in mind that he himself published it on March 3."

The letter recapped a meeting and a phone call in January between Jose Raul and Father Skertchly in which he asked the order for \$26 million.

The two met for an hour Jan. 6, according to the letter, and discussed the request, which included \$6 million "in fulfillment of what you say was your father's will, expressed orally to you in a conversation." The letter also said Jose Raul asked for "another \$20 million as compensation for your sufferings."

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Father Skertchly said in the letter that Jose Raul called him Jan. 8, repeating his financial requests and "affirming that 'if you give me the money, I will keep quiet about the truth.'" The letter said that Jose Raul wanted a response from the order by Jan. 13.

"However in no way can we accede to your request for money in exchange for silence," Father Skertchly wrote. "While we value all of the pain and suffering that you have shared with us, and we deplore the evil of scandal that may follow, we will never accept petitions of this sort, which are also illicit. We prefer to seek and face the truth, no matter how painful it may be."

Father Skertchly also told Jose Raul in the letter that the order was willing to "accompany" him and offer "the pastoral support you are willing to receive, since you told me, the deepest solution to your difficulties is not economic."

Father Skertchly also wrote that the order remained committed to "uncover the truth" about Father Maciel's life.

Lara said her relationship with Father Maciel began in Tijuana toward the end of the 1970s, when she was 19 and he was 56. Father Maciel, she said, told her he wanted a family, but didn't want to get married. He also told her he worked as a private detective, but at other times said he worked for the CIA.

Jose Raul was born two years later. He said beginning at age 7 he was sexually abused when his father "tried to rape me" while they were visiting Colombia. Omar said he suffered sexual abuse at the hands of Father Maciel, beginning at age 8. Cristian said he was not sexually abused.

The three young men spoke glowingly at times of their father, however. They described him as "very loving" and "the patriarch" of the family. Neighbors would say, "He should be a saint," a reflection, they said, of his easy manner with people.

Lara also spoke glowingly of Father Maciel.

"I idolized him," she said. "One time I told him, 'You're my god.'"

He traveled frequently, but would call daily and send letters, Lara said.

Lara said she had no idea of his double life. She raised few questions about Father Maciel's line of work or questioned suspicious happenings, such as Father Maciel registering Jose Raul with the surname "Gonzalez" even though the priest had used the alias "Rivas." Even people -- described as the "elites" of Mexico -- greeting him as "Father," failed to raise red flags.

"When we were eating breakfast, there were some that would say, 'Good morning, Padre,' and we had orders to withdraw ourselves," Omar said.

"We never asked ourselves why they called him 'Padre.' We supposed it was because he had many children."

The charade was exposed in 1997, when the family saw Father Maciel's image on the cover of the Mexican magazine *Contenido*, which ran a story on allegations of sexual abuse against him. He denied the contents of the story and Jose Raul said the family was sent money to buy all the copies in Cuernavaca, the city near Mexico City where they resided.

Lara believed him.

"I was totally blind," she said. Previous to the story, she said, "I never suspected a thing. I didn't know who I was living with."

She said she stopped believing him in 1999, when Jose Raul told her that he was sexually abused. "I didn't ever not believe my sons," she said.

Jose Raul and Omar were sent to Spain by their father to receive psychological treatment.

Before he died, the Gonzalez Lara family said Father Maciel promised them an inheritance that had been deposited in a trust fund, but that money has not been located. Legionaries' officials have not been of assistance, Jose Raul said.

"We're totally forsaken," Jose Raul said.

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Editor's Note: The Legionaries' letter can be found online at www.legionariesofchrist.org.

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