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Commissioner seen as likely outcome of Legionary investigation

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tAs a Vatican-sponsored investigation of the Legionaries of Christ reaches its end-game, the leading hypothesis in Rome appears to be that Pope Benedict XVI may appoint a special ?commissioner? to lead the order through a period a reform.

tThe appointment would, in effect, amount to a compromise between total suppression of the Legionaries, as some of the order?s fiercest critics have suggested, and a papal ?certificate of good conduct,? as some of its Vatican backers had initially hoped.

tWhile it?s not clear what might happen with the order?s current leadership team under this scenario, an April 13 piece in *Corriere della Sera* suggested that a commissioner would have ?full powers? to make decisions in the name of the pope. Though it?s considered likely that Benedict XVI would tap someone from outside the Legionaries, others have suggested that a commissioner could be named from among those Legionaries not tainted by the scandals surrounding the founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

tMaciel died in January 2008, after being ordered by the Vatican to live a life of ?prayer and penance? in 2006. In addition to charges that he sexually abused minor seminarians, the Legionaries have also acknowledged that Maciel had a ?prolonged and stable relationship? with a woman, who bore him a child, and that two other individuals have come forward saying they are Maciel?s children from another woman.

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The Legionaries claim almost 800 priests and 1,300 seminarians in 22 countries. Regnum Christi has a total membership of some 70,000.

t*Corriere* suggested the likely profile for a special commissioner would be a cardinal who does not currently hold a senior post, but who?s under the age of 80 and therefore still an elector for the next pope. That could point to someone like Portuguese Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, 78, who stepped down in 2008 as prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and who as a Claretian has a background in religious life.

tThe desire to find someone outside the order to implement a reform program is driven in part by the fact that the current leaders of the Legionaries, general director Fr. Álvaro Corcuera and vicar general Fr. Luis Garza,

were longtime aides of Maciel. Though both men have denied knowledge of Maciel?s misdeeds, critics say it strains credibility to believe that no one within Maciel?s inner circle was aware of his ?double life.?

tIn late March, veteran Italian Catholic writer Sandro Magister referred to the current leadership team of the Legionaries as a ?nomenklatura that must disappear,? arguing that real renewal is ?impossible as long as they remain in power.?

tIn addition to the pope, at least three senior Vatican officials will play a role in deciding the fate of the Legionaries: Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, who is currently travelling in Chile; American Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; and Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Religious.

tRodé in particular is seen as supportive of the Legionaries and their lay branch Regnum Christi, and at an earlier stage in the process had spoken privately of hoping to issue a ?certificate of good conduct? to the order and its current leadership.

tIn general, Vatican personnel sometimes find themselves struggling to reconcile two instincts with regard to the Legionaries. On the one hand, many believe that most Legionaries and Regnum Christi members are decent, faithful people, suggesting there?s something positive about the order worth preserving. Yet Vatican personnel also realize that especially given the events of the last month, their handling of the Legionaries will be seen as emblematic for the church?s broader response to the sexual abuse crisis.

tHow Benedict XVI balances those instincts will, therefore, be among the more closely watched judgment calls of his pontificate. Vatican sources say a decision could come shortly after the pope?s April 17-18 outing to Malta.

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Benedict's Trip to Malta

- For Benedict, Malta was a break in the storm [4]
- Benedict's strategy on crisis: 'Pastoral not Political' [5]
- Victim in Malta: Pope had 'tears in his eyes' [6]
- NEWSFLASH: Pope meets abuse victims in Malta [7]
- Pope delivers strong plea to resist secularism [8]
- Vatican strategy in Malta: 'Let Benedict be Benedict' [9]
- Crisis hangs over pope in Malta like volcanic ash [10]
- Pope keeps focus on Malta's past, present -- not his own [11]
- Malta president upstages pope on crisis [12]
- Church 'wounded by our sins' [13]
- Facing stormy seas, pope heads to Malta to recall a shipwreck [14]

John Allen is in Rome

- Sociologist compares today's crisis to Nazi smear campaign [15]
- Can a teaching pope get his house in order? [16] Allen's Friday column
- Brazil's bishops sound alarm about the Amazon [17]
- Vatican disses one of its own on sex abuse [18]
- Vatican spokesman says he doesn't feel under siege [19]
- Editor of Vatican paper comes out swinging on crisis [20]
- Commissioner likely to oversee Legion of Christ [21]

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[5] http://ncronline.org/node/17938
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/17936
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[14] http://ncronline.org/node/17913
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