

Legionaries reform process outlined

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Oct. 22, 2010



Italian Archbishop Velasio De Paolis celebrates Mass at the Legionaries of Christ Center for Higher Studies in Rome July 10. (CNS)

WASHINGTON -- The papally mandated reform of the Legionaries of Christ may take "two or three years or even more" and require the establishment of at least three commissions, the papal delegate overseeing the reform said in an Oct. 19 letter.

Italian Archbishop Velasio De Paolis, who was named by Pope Benedict XVI to the College of Cardinals the day after his letter was dated, urged members of the Legionaries to "set aside all suspicion and distrust" of one another during the process of reform and renewal of the order.

"If we are united and respectful of each other as we move forward, the journey will be swift and sure, but it will be certain shipwreck to let ourselves get caught up in the desire to win out and impose our own ideas," he said.

But Cardinal-designate De Paolis also said members must not allow the failings of the order's founder, the late Mexican Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, to be seen as representative of the Legion itself.

"The Legion has been approved by the church and it cannot be said that it is a not a work of God at the service of his kingdom and of the church," the letter said. "The founder's responsibilities cannot simply be transferred onto the Legion of Christ itself."

Pope Benedict ordered a reform of the Legionaries after revelations that Father Maciel, who died in 2008, had fathered children and sexually abused seminarians.

"The shock caused by the founder's actions had tremendous impact, on a scale capable of destroying the congregation itself, as many in fact predicted," said Cardinal-designate De Paolis. "Yet it not only survives, but is almost intact in its vitality."

He said some believe that the current superiors "could not have been ignorant of the founder's misdeeds" and therefore lied to protect him.

But despite media "denunciations" of Father Maciel since the 1990s, "it is something else to have proof that they were founded and even more that they were certain. This came only much later, and gradually."

The cardinal-designate, who also heads the Prefecture for the Economic Affairs of the Holy See at the Vatican, said that in meetings with the leadership of the order and his four papally appointed advisers, "we picked out some problems that we foresee will probably require us to establish a commission, above all and mainly the commission for the revision of the constitutions."

But, he added, "there also may be a need for a commission to approach those who in some way put forward claims against the Legion, and one for financial matters."

Noting that five bishops appointed by the pope had already completed an apostolic visitation that was designed to "offer the competent authority suggestions and proposals to remedy situations that are not in accordance with the Gospel ideal of religious life," Cardinal-designate De Paolis told the Legionaries that his role was "accompanying you on the path of renewal."

"This task belongs above all to the superiors who are called to organize, stimulate, move and commit everyone to this renewal in an active and orderly fashion," he said. "I ardently invite you to set aside all suspicion and distrust, and work concretely and positively for the good of the Legion, without lingering still on the past or feeding divisions."

He said the Legionaries of Christ might be well suited to carry out Pope Benedict's call for "apostles for the new evangelization."

"If today's society is to be Christianized, it needs people capable of assuming responsibility for the society of tomorrow, and who are formed in schools and universities," he said. "I believe that the congregation of the Legionaries of Christ finds its place to serve the church precisely in this area. And this brings good hope for the future."

In a statement posted on their website, a group of former Legionaries and other critics of the order said they were "shocked and disappointed" at the "affirming tone" of Cardinal-designate De Paolis' letter.

"It would seem the church is enabling and encouraging the Legion and Regnum Christi (a predominately lay movement under the spiritual direction of the Legionaries) to continue business as usual," said the statement by the Religious Groups Awareness International Network, or ReGAIN.

"One thing is obvious. The Vatican does not intend to come in with a big stick and clean house," it added. "The Legionary leaders are going to have to fix things up themselves and not just sit by idly waiting for the church to impose changes."

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