NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Legion inquiry could have happened years ago

Tom Roberts | Nov. 10, 2010

Tom Roberts

PERSPECTIVE

The headline on one account reads: ?Legionaries reform process outlined.? That is a generous way to characterize the remarks of Archbishop Velasio De Paolis in explaining what will occur as a result of Pope Benedict XVI?s mandate that the Legionaries of Christ undergo reform.

If the sex abuse crisis is at its deepest level a crisis of authority misused, of corruption and deception by the hierarchy and of a refusal by church leaders to honestly face an ugly problem and take responsibility for it, then the late and now notorious Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, stands as a potent symbol for the crisis and the flawed Vatican legal system. Maciel, who died in 2008, was a predator of the first order who not only abused seminarians, but also had at least two families on the side as well as two sons whom he abused, according to testimony by one of them.

But despite repeated and credible accusations against him, Maciel held the late Pope John Paul II enthralled because of his ability to raise money and to attract high numbers of young seminarians. He was a charming liar who kept judgment at bay in part by spreading piles of cash around to powerful ?friends? around the Vatican.

It is against that backdrop that I find one bit of analysis by De Paolis particularly disingenuous. Deep in the four-and-a-half-page letter, he writes:

> Some feel that the current superiors could not have been ignorant of the founder?s misdeeds. By silencing them, they must have lied. But we know that the problem is not that simple. The different denunciations published in newspapers from the ?90s onward were well-known, also to the superiors of the congregation. But 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. In such cases, communications are not easy. It is a vital requirement now to recover trust, for the collaboration we need to exercise now.

It is safe to say that no publication on the planet published more stories calling attention to the growing accusations against Maciel and the cult-like activities of Regnum Christi (the Legion?s lay wing, which has been banned by several dioceses) than the *National Catholic Reporter*. There certainly was no other publication that so persistently called, editorially, for an investigation of the allegations and full disclosure of the findings.

I was *NCR* editor during that period and oversaw the assigning, editing and publishing of those stories, most of them by Jason Berry and, before his 2007 death, Gerald Renner. I wrote the editorials. I?d be happy to send a copy of the entire file to De Paolis.

Establishing the case against Maciel need not have been a drawn-out, ?gradual? affair. The people who provided the documentation and on-the-record accounts for our stories were eager to talk to someone, anyone, in a position of authority in the Vatican. The same complainants upon whose testimony the disciplining of Maciel was finally based were available as early as 1997. The same resources that eventually permitted the Vatican prosecutor, Msgr. Charles Scicluna, to travel to New York, Mexico, Spain and elsewhere to collect testimony was certainly available years earlier.

But John Paul II and his secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, did not want that.

John Paul?s refusal to consider the accounts of Maciel?s victims, much less criticism of Regnum Christi, were part of a larger web of denial that included Sodano and then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who waited until the last months of John Paul?s life before ordering a canonical inquiry by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In all of those years and through the course of all of the articles and editorials, leaders of the order and its defenders in the conservative Catholic press attacked *NCR*. They argued not from evidence or because they had done due diligence. They responded out of blind obedience, out of a sense of unquestioning loyalty demanded by the very constitutions De Paolis now says must be changed.

Ours was not an unthinking or uninformed ?denunciation? of Maciel. In fact, it wasn?t a denunciation at all. What we did was persistent reporting on those who could not get a hearing anywhere else and insistently editorialize for an investigation and full disclosure.

The frightening truth of the matter is that the Maciel story is much bigger than the Legion and whatever refurbishing or renewal might go on in those ranks. The Maciel case confronts the larger community with a number of disturbing realities.

If so many can be so fooled by one person, from the faithful in the pews to the papal palace, what are the institution?s measures of integrity and truth? How do we discern between the real prophets and the charlatans?

I asked Berry for his impression of this new turn in the story, and he responded, not untypically for a Jesuit-educated journalist, with questions:

?How can Benedict or any future pontiff presume to speak about justice in the world when the Vatican?s system of tribunals stands aside, literally, when confronted with bishops and even cardinals [the late Hans Hermann Gröer of Austria] who have themselves abused young people?

?How can we make sense of the pope?s standing as a voice of peace on the world stage, when the Vatican tolerates rank meddling in its tribunals by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who was secretary of state at the time? ... How did the theologian Joseph Ratzinger, who built his reputation on moral absolutism, become as pope a practitioner of moral relativism??

Questions, indeed, are what we?re left with.

What was so threatening, one wonders, that Vatican leaders remained so disinterested in exploring the truth of the matter?

What does it say about our confidence in the heart of the Gospel that even after the Vatican compiled evidence that we are told deeply shocked the cardinal members of the doctrinal congregation -- evidence that only they were permitted to see while gathered in private and were forbidden from taking beyond that room -- church

officials are still looking to escape blame for their failures to hold Maciel to account?

The Legion will survive in some form and we?ll all continue to struggle with how to deal with Maciel and all that he did. But we won?t get to the heart of the problem, to the reason this crisis persists, by endless tinkering with the symptoms.

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

For more coverage of the reform of the Legionaries of Christ, see John Allen's story:
A realist agenda for reform of the Legion[1]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/05/2016 - 21:32*): http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/legion-inquiry-could-have-happened-years-ago

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/21205