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Gambling with history: Benedict and the Legion of Christ

Jason Berry | Dec. 29, 2010

Legionaries of Christ seminarians lead the recessional during Mass celebrated by top Vatican officials at the Legionaries of Christ's Center for Higher Studies in Rome June 8. (CNS)

Analysis

Pope Benedict XVI's decision last July to take control [1] of the Legionaries of Christ was a calculated risk. Amid a withering clergy abuse crisis, the pope chose an overseer to remake an international religious order built on the "charism" of a founder who sexually abused seminarians and fathered out-of-wedlock children, including two sons who claim they are incest victims.

The late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, lionized for most of his 86 years, is now the scapegoat for nearly everyone drawn into the legal quagmire he left: the Legion and its lay group, Regnum Christi; the pope; Vatican officials; and high-profile Legion supporters who in the past strongly defended Maciel against charges of abuse.

Just last month, the Vatican ordered [2] Maciel's photo removed from Legion facilities and banned sales of his writing, among other restrictions. However, hammering the memory of Maciel, like some statue of a fallen dictator, does little to answer the serious questions that still linger from his life of deception.

The story of the Legion of Christ and Maciel will continue to unfold in 2011. Interwoven into this story, however, has been a larger one, the story of the way the highest Catholic authorities entrusted to run the church reacted to the Maciel scandal, what decisions they made and what these decisions say about their own views of church and its mission.

It helps, then, to stand back and answer a few basic questions: Why did this scandal happen? How could John Paul II, a pope who showed brilliant moral vision in the face of Soviet communism, ignore the pedophilia allegations that trailed Maciel for decades? Why did he continue praising Maciel for six years after ex-Legionaries filed a 1998 canonical case with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger? How could Maciel's supporters, especially in the United States, so easily dismiss the testimony of so many credible accusers? Considering the order's strange history that keeps coming to light, is Benedict's decision to reform the Legion realistic?

While the question for Benedict is both immediate and risky, there is probably more at stake, depending on how those questions are answered, for the late John Paul and his legacy. How the story evolves and who controls the narrative could greatly influence whether John Paul continues to be viewed purely in heroic terms or as someone whose papacy was tainted by a scandal that came to light just five years after his election, but that he acknowledged only in the late days of his reign.

Read the second part of this report tomorrow: **George Weigel: Whitewashing history** [3]

Read the *NCR* editorial about Maciel and the Legion reform: **Truth and a call to renewal** [4]

It was in 1983 that John Paul approved Legion bylaws that allowed Maciel to insulate himself from scrutiny. In the order's "private vows," Legionaries pledged never to criticize the founder, and to report on anyone who did. Five months before his death, John Paul approved Regnum Christi statutes that are in some ways as strange and excessively controlling as the private vows.

Benedict revoked the private vows in 2007, after banishing Maciel from active ministry. Maciel died in 2008. A Vatican investigation of Regnum Christi, the lay arm of the order that some describe as a cult, is currently under way. As Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, the papal delegate and canon lawyer, oversees the writing of a new Legion constitution in Rome, Benedict appears to be gambling that it is better to salvage than to dismantle the organization, despite its many disillusioned ex-members, and the opinions of six U.S. bishops who banned the Legion and Regnum Christi from their dioceses.

Benedict is now pushing the Legion to compensate Maciel's victims, especially older victims who have no legal recourse for abuse from long ago, a striking departure from the Vatican's historic aloofness to legal remediation. The Vatican has no mechanism for compensating victims. In essence, the pope is pushing the Legion as a judge would in trying to get two parties to settle a dispute.

Bishop Ricardo Watty Urquidi of Tepic, Mexico, one of five prelates charged with investigating the Legion for the Holy See, said as much to reporters in Mexico May 18: "We need, then, to take care of [Maciel's] victims, as much inside as outside the Legion, and to compensate them for damages. This is something we all agreed on, and the pope accepted ? just as he has been doing, and bravely so."

The pope has evinced a pastoral approach to the Legion's 800 priests, 2,500 seminarians and 60,000 Regnum Christi members. He calls down Maciel for a "twisted, wasted life," in *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, a new book-length interview with Peter Seewald. At the same time, Benedict praises the "dynamism and strength by which [Maciel] built up the Legionaries." He told Seewald: "Naturally corrections must be made, but by and large the congregation is strong."

The Legion certainly is strong by some measures. In Rome, the order symbolizes wealth and orthodoxy. The Legion college campus, Regina Apostolorum, provides newly invested bishops a residence, Mater Ecclesia hall, for introductory training. "The facilities and grounds are spectacular and the Legionaries have been superb hosts," wrote Bishop David M. O'Connell of Trenton, N.J., in a Sept. 13 Web post. "Meals are well prepared and served by members of the community who have demonstrated an uncanny ability to anticipate virtually every need." What O'Connell describes is vintage Legion, catering to the most powerful churchmen.

De Paolis has a commission of canonists and Legionaries drafting a new constitution for the Legion in Rome. Meanwhile, the order faces lawsuits in Connecticut from one of Maciel's sons, an alleged incest victim, and in

Rhode Island from a woman contesting the will of her aunt, Gabrielle Mee, a Regnum Christi member who died before it was known that Maciel had fathered children. The Mee estate that went to the Legion totaled upwards of $7.5 million, according to the *Hartford Courant*.

Both lawsuits seek financial settlements from the order, arguing that senior Legion officials long knew of Maciel's twisted life.

Foxes guard the hen house

Five days before Watty's May remarks in Mexico, Legion superior general Fr. Álvaro Corcuera sought forgiveness of Juan Vaca, one of Maciel's oldest victims, who, as a young priest, beseeched the Vatican to oust the Legion founder. Corcuera told Vaca that Legionaries in Rome were reading a 1976 letter he had sent to Pope Paul VI in which he identified 20 other sexual abuse victims. Vaca sent the document to the Vatican two more times. Corcuera told Vaca a Legion committee in Rome was considering reparations.

"Unfortunately, we addressed these things very slowly and late," Benedict conceded to Seewald. "Somehow they were concealed very well, and only around the year 2000 did we have any concrete clues."

Why the pope fixed on the year 2000 is unclear. Vaca's dossier on Maciel, which also sought dispensation of his vows, went to the Vatican from his bishop in Rockville Centre, N.Y., in 1990. Ratzinger's office approved the dispensation in 1993, while ignoring the abuse accusations. Nevertheless, Benedict's admission of a response "slowly and late" is a rare admission about the systemic failure to prosecute Maciel.

Several of the priests on De Paolis' committee to rewrite the constitution were strategic figures in Maciel's life.

The Irish-born Fr. Anthony Bannon directed the North American work of Regnum Christi for many years from the Legion headquarters in Cheshire, Conn. Regnum Christi members discussed Maciel's letters in study groups. Targeting new members and raising money was central to the group's mission.

Small, far-flung groups of consecrated women live as celibates in Regnum Christi communities, often staffing Legion schools. A key figure in the Rhode Island lawsuit, Bannon was an architect of Legion fundraising and the Web site campaign against Maciel's early victims. Bannon's presence, among five other priests on De Paolis' group drafting a constitution, is like the proverbial fox guarding the hen house. Bannon's apparatus touted Maciel's heroism to inspire seminarians who, in turn, accompanied priests on fundraising calls to targeted benefactors.

Of the other Legion priests on the commission to revise the constitutions, Fr. Roberto Aspe Hinojosa is a Mexican and one of Maciel's earliest and closest followers, according to Sandro Magister in *L'espresso*, a prominent Italian newsweekly. A Spaniard, Fr. José García Sentandreu, oversees the Legion's apostolate works, while Fr. Gabriel Sotres was head of the order's communications for two decades. How De Paolis can hope to find the ethical balance for reforming the Legion from these men strains credulity.

On Sept. 12, Vaca sent an e-mail to De Paolis claiming that because of quotes he provided for the 1997 *Hartford Courant* investigation of Maciel, the Legion tried "to destroy my professional reputation by false declarations in the *National Catholic Register*" ? the Legion-owned weekly paper ? "and on the Legionnaire community Web site, LegionaryFacts.org."

Legion priest Owen Kearns, editor of the *Register*, had written on LegionaryFacts.org following the *Courant* story, "Vaca is seeking revenge because he was incompetent in his job, and was being demoted."

"Vaca is just one of the disgruntled old men instigating a campaign of lies and calumnies against our beloved

and innocent founder," wrote Kearns and Bannon in the *Register*. The comment also appeared on the Legion Web page.

Kearns recently issued an apology in the *Register* to the *Courant*; the late Gerald Renner, who wrote the original Legion story for the *Courant*; and this writer, with unnamed victims mentioned in passing.

What is Regnum Christi?

Regnum Christi, the other part of what Maciel called the Movement, states on its Web site that it is not a cult because the Catholic church does not approve cults. Did John Paul understand Regnum Christi? That is hard to imagine, given Benedict's decision to open an investigation of the Legion's lay wing. Is it a cult? Do certain practices amount to brainwashing? These questions gnaw at Genevieve Kineke, an orthodox Catholic, wife, and mother of four in East Greenwich, R.I., who has chronicled the Movement with scholarly resolve on her blog. Kineke is one of several women who left Regnum Christi over practices they considered deceptive. The group formed a loose network to assist others who leave.

Regnum Christi cultivates wealthy couples, particularly stay-at-home mothers, while seeking consecrated celibates to live like nuns and staff Legion schools. "When people leave the Movement it cuts through families, friendships and parishes," said Kineke, who has been an unofficial counselor to about 200 people in the last 10 years. "Some are so spiritually scarred they find it difficult to trust the church at all ? the manipulation has been too traumatic."

Another ex-Regnum Christi member, who asked that her name not be used, waged a virtual one-woman campaign briefing Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, who banned the Legion [5] and the lay wing from his archdiocese. "I've always suspected the flaws in the organization are endemic to it," O'Brien told NCR's John L. Allen Jr. in 2008. "There's no remedying them, because it's so deeply ingrained." Prelates in Minneapolis-St. Paul; Columbus, Ohio; Los Angeles; Miami; Ft. Wayne, Ind.; Baton Rouge, La.; and Richmond, Va., have banned the Movement from their dioceses.

In some houses of consecrated Regnum Christi members, the day begins with a woman entering bedrooms or a dormitory at 5:20 a.m., shouting: "Christ our king!" The women bolt out of bed and reply: "Thy kingdom come!"

"It took me a long time to conclude it was a cult," said Kineke. "I realized that the Movement entirely suppressed the true nature of freedom. Everything from posture and demeanor to verbal responses is scripted. The Movement uses smoke and mirrors to suggest the disciplined convents or seminaries of years past, but Maciel produced a culture that strips away basic freedoms. They thrive on efficiency, reaching quotas, meeting deadlines like a hard-core industry. Everyone read Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. 'Time is kingdom' was Maciel's gospel, meaning that you had to always be urgently working for the Movement. For women who did not need a job, you felt the Kingdom depended on you."

Kineke's blog, life-after-RC.com, is a major link on the Web site of regainnetwork.org, administered by Paul Lennon, a family therapist in Alexandria, Va. Lennon left the Legion and his priesthood in the 1980s after a falling out with Maciel over his dictatorial practices. In 2007 the Legion sued Lennon and ReGAIN, alleging intellectual property theft for the posting of the Legion constitution. The real target was ReGAIN's message board, which had become a clearing house for people leaving Regnum Christi and sharing Legion information. Unable to raise funds for a long legal fight, Lennon dismantled the message board and returned the constitution. Maciel died several months later, and within two years the world knew about his children.

At a Nov. 30, 2004, celebration with Maciel at the Vatican, John Paul praised Regnum Christi for fostering a "civilization of Christian justice and love" and approved their statutes. Among the rules:

> 103. Recruitment happens in stages, going successfully from kindness to friendship, from friendship to confidence, from confidence to conviction, from conviction to submission.
>
> 494. No one shall visit outsiders in their homes, deal with them frequently or speak with them by telephone without justifiable reasons or for apostolic purposes. ?
>
> 509. The center's Director or Manager shall review all correspondence from members of the center and release that which he or she judges to be opportune.

An apostolic visitation ? a Vatican investigation ? of Regnum Christi has just started. "Therefore, any changes, if needed, to Regnum Christi statutes would come later," Legion spokesman Jim Fair told *NCR*.

Benedict's dilemma

John Paul's conflicted view of the sex abuse crisis registered in his April 2002 address at the Apostolic Palace to the cardinals of the United States. Stating that the sexual abuse of youngsters was "rightly considered a crime by society" and "an appalling sin in the eyes of God," he said: "To the victims and their families, wherever they may be, I express my profound sense of solidarity and concern."

He then defended the bishops for "a generalized lack of knowledge" and taking the "advice of the clinical experts," meaning therapists at treatment centers where bishops sent the priests. Then, in reference to offending priests, he said: "We cannot forget the power of Christian conversion, that radical decision to turn away from sin and back to God."

He also declared: "People need to know there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young."

What was John Paul's answer? "The power of conversion" for clergy child molesters or "no place in the priesthood" for them? Conversion or exclusion? On the worst church crisis in centuries, John Paul demonstrated ambivalence, not certainty.

Benedict inherited a huge mess from John Paul. Ratzinger's detachment in the 1980s as a cardinal from serious cases, recently exposed in the European press, *The New York Times* and The Associated Press, equally underscores John Paul's lack of leadership, as well as more systemic factors: The Vatican monarchical system has no separation of powers and no bona fide court system for criminal prosecution. Benedict in theory has the power to demote, punish or call down cardinals, but that would violate unwritten rules of the hierarchy.

As De Paolis began making personnel changes in the Legion last month, Benedict's prospects of a reform to boost his image from the scandals earlier this year appear to hang on whether De Paolis can secure Legion financial resources to produce a victims' compensation plan. That would be a historic breakthrough and sign of visionary papal leadership. Judges in democratic countries oversee negotiated settlements all the time ? not so Vatican tribunals under canon law.

A deeper question is whether the Holy See has control of the Legion, and if so, just how the pope will change the organization.

On Nov. 11, De Paolis responded to Vaca: "I have received your e-mail dated November 3, 2010. Sorry for my delay in answering you, but at present I have many commitments to meet. As far as your case is concerned, I think that the only solution is to address to the responsible [parties] of the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ. God bless you."

[Jason Berry is an author and producer of a film documentary on Maciel, "Vows of Silence." The Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute provided support for this article.]

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