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Truth and a call to renewal

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An NCR Editorial

It is fitting that the final years of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the disgraced founder of the Legionaries of Christ, straddled the two papacies that have been deeply scarred by the ever expanding priest sex abuse crisis: that of John Paul II, the figure who did the most to promote Maciel and his order, and Benedict XVI, the highest-level curial figure to understand the dimensions of the crisis and who, as pope, is left to deal with its consequences.

Maciel, who died in 2008, lived a monstrous double life and was a master manipulator of the powerful in the Vatican. He was skilled at winning over those who were influenced by cash and shows of obeisance. His slavish adherence, at least publicly, to orthodoxies and personal pieties provided him the cover he needed to maintain his status while hiding a life that included horrific abuse of young seminarians and fathering at least three children with two different women.

Maciel embodied the arrogance, sense of privilege, lack of accountability and rot in the ranks of church leadership of which the abuse crisis is merely the most glaring symptom.

As Jason Berry writes [1], who controls the telling of the history of Maciel and his order is important. The overwhelming struggle of sex abuse victims to get their story out is but one indication of how difficult it has been for the church to acknowledge the truth of this ugly reality.

Some contend that John Paul was simply ill served by those around him, kept in the dark about what was occurring in the sex abuse crisis worldwide and about the charges against Maciel specifically. If that were the case, then John Paul, for all of his international bravado and accomplishments, was unbelievably detached from what was occurring inside his church and blind to the reports being filed in his dicasteries.

Certainly there was more to it than a few errant palace functionaries. The myth of Maciel fit John Paul's idea of what church should be ? grand, conspicuous, highly regimented, filled with loyal priests who would not question authority, rich in personal heroics, and larded top to bottom with pious practices and rules that helped maintain order. Except that it was an utter sham. Maciel was undoubtedly John Paul's worst personnel mistake, but it was not his only one. The characteristics he treasured ? blind loyalty and correct ideology over pastoral acumen or creative leadership ? were evident in many of the bishops he appointed, and more than a few of those appointments turned round to haunt him and the wider church.

If John Paul was ill served by his curia, he was just as badly served by some of his highest-profile acolytes in the United States. Such noted conservatives as George Weigel, Professor Mary Ann Glendon, former *Crisis* magazine editor and Republican consultant Deal Hudson, and the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things* magazine, insisted on Maciel's innocence in the face of abundant reporting on the persistent and credible accusations from former seminarians and priests in his order.

None bothered to speak to any of the accusers. It was enough that the Maciel myth fit the John Paul II myth. No amount of unpleasant truth could disturb the romance of it all.

Benedict, referring to the scandal in a recent address to the curia, said, "We must accept this humiliation as an exhortation to truth and a call to renewal. Only the truth saves."

We agree, and on that basis hope that the pope rethinks his strategy for dealing with the Legion. Remaking the Legion with former leaders who were duped by Maciel hardly inspires confidence in the cause of renewal.

Any true call to renewal ? whether in the Legion or the wider church ? will require a deep and honest investigation of the clerical and hierarchical culture that produced Maciel and so many others who betrayed the Gospel and the community and that enabled their crimes to be covered up for years.

Read the companion reports to this editorial:

Part One: **Gambling with history: Benedict and the Legion of Christ** [1]

Part Two: **George Weigel: Whitewashing history** [2]

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/22046
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