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Conservative Catholic group gripped by scandal

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 2, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- For a long time it was Opus Dei, and then, even before massive sex scandals exploded around their founder, it was the Legionaries of Christ. Today, at least in Italy, it now seems Communion and Liberation?s turn to be the conservative Catholic group generating the most controversy, the sexiest news headlines, and the greatest volume of conspiracy theories.

tThat?s likely a special source of heartburn for Pope Benedict XVI, for whom Communion and Liberation has always been his personal favorite among the new movements in the Catholic church.

tIt?s also a colossal case of bad timing, since a beatification cause for the group?s founder, the late Italian Fr. Luigi Giussani, was recently opened and endorsed by the bishops of Lombardy, the region where the cause is based.

tWant an index of how hot the spotlight has been?

Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan, widely seen as a leading candidate to be the next pope and someone with a background in Communion and Liberation, obviously now feels compelled to distance himself. Scola told a group of reporters on April 26: ?What do I know about Communion and Liberation? I deal with the church of God. If you want to know something about Communion and Liberation, go ask them.?

Another sign of the times is that Giussani?s successor, Spanish Fr. Julián Carrón, recently wrote a letter to an Italian newspaper confessing the group?s ?great humiliation,? conceding that if so many people see the group in terms of money and power ?we must have given them some pretext,? and apologizing for the ?superficiality? with which some in the group have lived out Giussani?s inspiration.

To be sure, this isn?t the first time Communion and Liberation has been at the center of a media storm. In the mid-1970s, there was a brief flurry of speculation that it was actually a CIA front. The difference today is that the underlying cause of the tempest is not rumor, but serious legal charges against some of the group?s most prominent members.

tFor an outfit that has long prided itself on close ties to the Italian political scene, it was perhaps inevitable that such a bill would one day come due.

Robert Formigoni, the highest profile adherent of Communion and Liberation in Italian politics, now finds himself embroiled in a deepening corruption scandal. The longtime governor of the Lombardy region is at the centre of a judicial investigation into bribery for the awarding of public health contracts. He also faces charges of suspicious ties to a shady businessman now in jail on corruption charges, and of using public funds to pay for his private vacations.

tFormigoni is a member of Memores Domini, a body of consecrated laity committed to lifelong celibacy, which is part of the broader Communion and Liberation movement. Four female members of Memores Domini staff

Benedict XVI?s papal household.

tAnother veteran member of Communion and Liberation, Antonio Simone, has already been arrested and charged with being part of a scheme to bilk as much as $74 million from a well-known Italian health institute. According to media reports, Simone?s personal Catholic piety is the stuff of legend; apparently, during the 1990s, when he held public office as an assessor in Lombardy, he would convoke his staff for morning prayer before beginning the day?s work.

tRiffing off those bombshells, an Italian paper recently did a write-up of all the various public officials and tycoons in Lombardy with ties to Communion and Liberation, under the provocative title, *Comunione a Molto Poltrone*, meaning ?communion and lots of seats of power.? Among other things, the article suggested that businesses with ties to Communion and Liberation control assets in excess of almost $100 billion, representing five percent of Italy?s Gross Domestic Product.

tAs Opus Dei and other Catholic movements have done before, Communion and Liberation has tried to explain that the mere fact a businessman belongs to the group doesn?t mean the group controls his business, still less that it owns the assets of that business. Such nuance, however, has been largely lost in the present climate.

tAt first, spokespersons for Communion and Liberation put on the mantle of martyrs, complaining of a ?media lynching? which is taking on ?the face of a Calvary that we don?t deserve.?

tThe May 1 letter from Carrón indicates something of a shift in tactics, or at least in tone. Rather than complaining of unfair treatment, Carrón apologized for the failure of some members to follow Giussani?s lead ? although he did add, ?It will be up to the judges to determine if the errors committed by some also constitute crimes.?

tIt remains to be seen if that softer, gentler approach will be enough to put out the fire. One early test would seem to be whether the sainthood cause for Giussani moves forward quickly, or is put on a back burner while the current scandals play out.

tCommunion and Liberation was founded in Italy in the 1950s as an outgrowth of Giussani?s teaching and youth ministry. Today it?s an international movement present in roughly 80 countries around the world, including a small footprint in the United States, where its best-known exponent is Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete.

Among the core ideas of Communion and Liberation is that of the encounter with Christ as an ?experience? which transforms all of one?s life. As a result, the group sharply rejects any effort to style Christianity as a purely private matter without social consequences.

tCommunion and Liberation sponsors an enormous annual meeting in the Italian seaside city of Rimini, which is usually seen in Italy as the informal kick-off to the annual political season after the summer break because of its all-star lineup of political and journalistic heavyweights. The meeting often draws around 700,000 people, and is seen by many observers as a cross-section of Catholic civil society.

tOver the years, Communion and Liberation has sometimes been seen as a right-wing alternative to the more progressive ethos of other sectors of the Italian church, especially in the vast Milan archdiocese from 1980 to 2002 under Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, a hero to the church?s more liberal wing.

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