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Another Legionary priest caught in scandal

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Screen grab of Fr. Thomas Williams in a television appearance.

A high-profile American priest in the Legionaries of Christ has acknowledged having had a sexual relationship with a woman and fathering her child, adding another chapter to the growing scandals surrounding the controversial religious order.

Fr. Thomas Williams, known for his work as a TV commentator and popular spiritual writer and speaker, issued a statement today confirming he had fathered a child with a woman ?a number of years ago,? and said that he and the superiors of the order have decided that he will take a year off without any public ministry ?to reflect on my commitments as a priest.?

?I am truly sorry to everyone who is hurt by this revelation,? Williams said in the statement.

Out of what he described as ?respect for the privacy of the woman and her child,? Williams declined to identify the woman or provide other details. He confirmed, however, that the relationship had occurred while he was already a priest and a member of the Legionaries.

Williams told *NCR* the woman has declined economic assistance, and that she was neither his student nor someone to whom he had offered spiritual direction.

Williams decided to come forward after a former Legionary priest in Chile, who is now active in a group called the ?Association of Aid for Victims of the Legion of Christ,? reported rumors of the affair to senior Vatican officials. A copy of that report was obtained by *NCR*.

The report also asserted that Williams has had sexual relations with students at the Legion?s university in Rome, Regina Apostolorum, where until recently he was on the faculty. Williams denied those charges.

The report further alleged that Williams had a sexual relationship with the daughter of a prominent American Catholic personality. On that point, Williams said he will not comment on specific individuals.

Fr. Luis Garza, the top official for the Legion in North America, sent a letter to members today informing them that Williams will undergo ?a period of reflection, prayer and atonement.?

?In the wake of all that we have been through as a movement in the past several years, it won?t surprise me if you are disappointed, angry or feel your trust shaken once again,? Garza wrote, saying that any further information ?is at the discretion of those involved.?

Because Williams? relationship did not involve a minor or accusations of abuse, it is not subject to the Vatican?s anti-abuse procedures. Traditionally, the Vatican has left discipline for transgressions involving a consensual relationship to the priest?s superiors, in this case the leaders of the Legion and the papal delegate appointed by Benedict XVI to oversee the order, Italian Cardinal Velasio de Paolis.

Born in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., Williams was ordained a Legionary priest in 1994. In recent years, he?s emerged as perhaps the best-known American member of the Legion of Christ, particularly in the media.

In addition to teaching at Regina Apostolorum, Williams has served as a Vatican and religious affairs analyst for NBC, CBS, and Sky News, and has published 14 books on Catholic spirituality and doctrine, including *Becoming the Christian You Want to Be* and *A Christian Guide to Conscience*. He?s also been a speaker in Catholic venues around the world.

Williams has played several leadership roles within the Legion, including acting as publisher of ?Zenit,? a web-based news agency sponsored by the order, for 10 years.

The news about Williams comes as the Legionaries have confirmed that at least seven other priests in the troubled order are currently being investigated for alleged sexual abuse of minors.

The order recently announced that an internal probe had uncovered ?some allegations of gravely immoral acts and more serious offenses?, which have been reported to the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, confirmed the cases were being reviewed, saying that most ?date back decades.?

In turn, the recent revelations build upon a crisis in the Legion that exploded in 2006, when the Vatican sentenced its founder, the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, to a life of ?prayer and penance.? The order was later forced to acknowledge that Maciel had been guilty of a wide range of misconduct, including the sexual abuse of members, fathering children out of wedlock, and misappropriation of funds.

The following is the full text of the statement released by Williams on May 15:

> ?A number of years ago I had a relationship with a woman and fathered her child. I am deeply sorry for this grave transgression and have tried to make amends. My superiors and I have decided it would be best for me to take a year without active public ministry to reflect on the wrong I have done and my commitments as a priest. I am truly sorry to everyone who is hurt by this revelation, and I ask for your prayers as I seek guidance on how to make up for my errors.?

Williams, who is currently undergoing medical treatment for a form of cancer, said he?s likely to spend his year with his parents in Michigan.

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