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Vatican says disgraced Legion of Christ needs a new identity

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VATICAN CITY -- The disgraced Legion of Christ religious order needs to rethink its identity before going forward with its internal reform, the papal envoy in charge of the group's overhaul told priests and lay members in a letter published Wednesday.

Cardinal Velasio De Paolis was appointed in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI to oversee the order's reform after revelations that its founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel, had lived a double life, abusing children and fathering a son.

Macial had enjoyed iconic status in the Legion, with strong suspicions that its leaders had been at least partly aware of his actions.

De Paolis writes that the troubled groups' various branches, which include priests, religious and laypeople, need "a common platform" to "regulate reciprocal relations ... according to the identity proper to each group."

This "joint reflection on the identity and mission" of the order, said Fr. Andreas Schoeggl, a Legion spokesman, needs to precede the final revision of the order's internal rules, which has been ongoing for the last two years and was the main goal of the pope's taking over of the order.

The papal delegate's letter sees the light after several observers have criticized the slow pace of reform inside the Legion.

On June 22, Fr. Thomas V. Berg, a former Legionary, wrote on the conservative blog First Things about "The Legion's Scandal of Stalled Reform." According to Berg, "the Legion's superiors ... have fostered a culture of institutional opposition to the radical reform that is truly required."

Schoeggl denied this, saying reform "proceeds with a constant pace" and that there is "absolutely no intention" of returning to the past.

Still, new scandals have buffeted the Legion in recent weeks. Its most famous priest, Fr. Thomas Williams, admitted fathering a child, while his superiors acknowledged covering up for him for years. And this week, dozens of women who attended a Legion high school in Wakefield, R.I., accused school officials of abuse and deception, according to a letter sent to the Vatican that was obtained by The Associated Press.

"For any errors made by our order in the past, we do apologize," Margarita Martinez, director of the Immaculate Conception Academy told the AP. "We are sorry these young women have suffered and been harmed in any way."

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