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Legionaries of Christ founder said to father child

Jason Berry | Feb. 3, 2009

Fr. Marcial Maciel and Pope John Paul II (CNS photo)

A spokesperson for the Legionaries of Christ said Feb. 3 the order has recently reached the conclusion that its founder, a Mexican priest named Marcial Maciel Degollado who was close to the late Pope John Paul II, was guilty of conduct that is "surprising, difficult to understand, and inappropriate for a Catholic priest."

The spokesperson, Jim Fair, who works out of the Legionaries' U.S. headquarters in Connecticut, declined to offer any specifics in response to an *NCR* inquiry.

Speaking on background, however, a Legionary priest in Rome confirmed the order has learned that Maciel, who died in January 2008, apparently fathered a child out of wedlock.

Four former Legionaries or supporters of the Legion, meanwhile, told *NCR* that priests in the order were recently sharing this news with members and supporters in private briefings in the United States and Mexico.

Fair declined to say whether the Legion's discoveries amount to a confirmation of earlier accusations of sexual abuse leveled against Maciel by ex-members of the order, which first became public in 1997. Those accusations were eventually the subject of an investigation by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which ended in 2006 with instructions that Maciel discontinue all public ministries and lead a life of "prayer and penance."

Though the Vatican declined to initiate a formal canonical process against Maciel because of his advanced age, its action was widely seen as a concession that at least some of the charges against him at that time had merit.

Rumors that the Legionaries had reached new damning conclusions about Maciel have built in recent days in the wake of confidential meetings the new superior of the order, Fr. Álvaro Corcuera, has been holding with members to inform them of an internal probe of Maciel's conduct.

Legionary sources told *NCR* that Corcuera has stressed that Maciel's misconduct was not a "one-time slipup," but rather "a pattern that stretched over years."

These sources said Corcuera and other Legionary officials began their review after Maciel stepped down as the order's superior in January 2006, and after the Vatican's conclusions were issued four months later.

These new statements represent the first time that the Legionaries of Christ have conceded that Maciel was guilty of any misconduct. When the sex abuse charges first surfaced, the order issued strenuous denials; in the wake of the 2006 Vatican investigation it issued a statement suggesting that the finding was a "new cross that God has allowed [Maciel] to suffer."

Links to earlier *NCR* stories: **The Legionaries of Christ and its founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel.** [1]

An update: **Legionaries living through 'a process of purification'** [2]

Internet bloggers, some with close Legion contacts, were also active Feb. 3, reflecting the spreading news of the Maciel misconduct.

"The rank and file were told in various places - some on retreat, others in special meetings," wrote Genevieve Kineke, on www.Life-after-rc.com, referring to the Legionaire priests who were informing Legion members and supporters.

Kineke, a former member of the Legion's lay affiliate Regnum Christi, has written extensively about the order one her website. Regnum Christi, with a membership of roughly 50,000, is pivotal to the order's fundraising and in running the two dozen Legion prep schools in the U.S.

Tom Hoopes, editor of the *National Catholic Register*, a weekly published by the Legion at its Cheshire, CT, headquarters, issued a Feb. 3 apology as a comment on the blog of a Catholic author, www.AmyWelborn.wordpress.com.

"All, I want to say is, I'm sorry. I want to say it here, because I defended Fr. Maciel here, and I need to be on the record regarding that defense," Hoops wrote.

"I'm sorry to the victims, who were victims twice, the second time by calumny. I'm sorry, to the Church, which has been damaged. I'm sorry, to those I've misled....The Church did bring justice, and did penalize this man...I seek repentance and forgiveness."

In a sign of turmoil within the Legion's ranks, Hoops backed off his statement somewhat later that day, adding: "I'm not saying every accusation against the man is true."

In the tightly-run lay network of Regnum Christi groups, Legion priests have held out Maciel as a saint. Some have said the Vatican punishment was a mistake, even as the order has professed strict obedience to the pope.

Since 1997, when the charges were first reported in the media, the Legion derided them as a conspiracy.

In 1998, Marciel victims filed a formal Vatican complain. It was not until 2004 that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger ordered an investigation. When, as Pope Benedict, he approved the punishment, a Vatican source told *NCR* that "more than twenty but less than 100" victims had testified. However, in punishing Maciel, the Vatican made no mention of the victims while praising the Legion and Regnum Christi.

"We have the same position as the Vatican," Fair told *NCR*, regarding the sex abuse investigation. "There was no trial. Father Maciel was asked to retire and he did."

That hairsplitting tracks the Legion strategy under Corcuera. He has attempted to demonstrate fealty to Pope Benedict while subtly suggesting the Vatican erred in ousting Maciel from ministry.

The order's website has portrayed Maciel as a spiritual warrior, airbrushing his punishment, to fuel a fundraising engine that supports a $260 million Legion budget, including the prep schools and colleges in several countries.

For many years Maciel had cultivated conservative celebrities and financial figures. As examples, Carlos Slim of Mexico, reportedly one of the world's richest men, became a major backer of Legion schools, and recently made headlines for purchasing a large block of *New York Times* stock.

Placido Domingo, the internationally renowned tenor, has sung at Legion fundraisers. William Bennett, the CNN commentator, is a regular speaker at Legion conferences. The late Father Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, was one of Maciel's staunchest defenders. George Wiegel, a biographer of Pope John Paul II, has been a longtime champion of the Legionaries. The outgoing U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, Mary Ann Glendon, was a prominent defender of Maciel and taught at the Legion's university in Rome.

Maciel died at 87 and was buried in his hometown of Cotija, Mexico, a retreat and conference center for the Legion.

"All the major orders - Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans ? have founders who are saints," said a former high-ranking Vatican official, unaware of the new allegations. "That's a big hurdle for the Legionaries when you look at Pope Benedict's decision [in 2006.]

The Legion has an idea that his reputation can somehow be rehabilitated - wait long enough, cast doubt on the investigation, and years from now promote him to be a saint."

The order has maintained strong Vatican supporters. On Dec. 14, Cardinal Franc Rodé of the Congregation for Religious told a Regnum Christi gathering in Brasilia: "God has made the Legion of Christ and Regnum Christi flourish as the work of his own hands...Know that you can always count on the Pope's esteem and support, as well as on mine."

In recent days, Legion supporters have clearly been shaken. According to a former Regnum Christi member with close ties to the group, when priests in Atlanta delivered the new revelations at a three-day silent retreat, "Women began sobbing."

Author and NCR contributor Jason Berry is director of a film documentary about Maciel, available at www.VowsofSilenceFilm.com .

NCR Senior Correspondent John Allen also contributed to this article.

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