

## Rhode Island judge releases documents revealing inner workings of Legion of Christ

Jason Berry | Feb. 15, 2013  
Legion of Christ investigation

Documents released Friday by a Rhode Island judge provide a new window into the internal workings of the Legion of Christ, a religious order of priests whose founder was revealed to have sexually abused seminarians and fathered children by at least two women.

The release of the voluminous court records by Superior Court Judge Michael Silverstein came within days of the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, who ordered an investigation into allegations against Legion founder Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado when Benedict played a powerful role in the Vatican as a cardinal and again in the early years of his papacy.

These documents are expected to shed new light on a scandal Benedict inherited from Pope John Paul II, who was a longtime and loyal supporter of Maciel even after the allegations against him were filed in 1998.

Benedict's trip to Mexico last year ignited a blaze of negative media coverage because of his failure to meet with sexual victims of the late Maciel, and the global reach of the scandal has cast a shadow on Benedict and his papacy.

The documents first surfaced in a suit accusing Legion officials of defrauding a wealthy widow, Gabrielle Mee, of tens of millions of dollars. They remained sealed when Silverstein dismissed the suit against the Legion and Bank of America. He ruled that Mary Lou Dauray, Mee's niece, lacked legal standing to bring suit.

At the time, however, the judge's 39-page ruling detailed questionable fundraising tactics and raised suspicions about the Legion: "The transfer of millions of dollars worth of assets -- through will, trust and gifts -- from a steadfastly spiritual, elderly woman to her trusted but clandestinely dubious spiritual leaders raises a red flag to this court."

The documents were released in response to a petition to Silverstein by the *National Catholic Reporter*, The Associated Press, *The New York Times* and the *Providence Journal*.

The manner in which Maciel and the Legion used their funds as a religious charity is central the fraud allegations in the Rhode Island probate case brought by Dauray, who is seeking to recover the fortune her late aunt handed over to the Legion as a "consecrated woman" in its lay wing, Regnum Christi.

"They used her as a piggy bank," said Bernard Jackvony, Dauray's attorney. "They saw her as an economic engine and used her for \$30 million in donations for 16 years. The defrauding of Mrs. Mee looms over this entire case."

Fleet Bank, which later merged with Bank of America, facilitated the Legion's access to the flow of money from Mee and the charitable trust of her late husband, Timothy. According to Jackvony, the bank should have

maintained a wall between its duty to administer a trust and the Legion's aggressive action to gain control of the funds.

"The Legion's business relationship as a customer of the bank facilitated a sharing of information on the Mee trust that should have been kept in confidence," Jackvony said.

With access to the trust and Mee's donations, the Legion bought a \$35 million corporate campus from IBM in Thornwood, N.Y., in the 1990s.

Maciel's status as a successful fundraiser and his ability to attract laypeople and seminarians to his organization was due in part to a close relationship he had with the late John Paul II. The pope championed the Legion and praised Maciel in 1994 as "an efficacious guide to youth." John Paul continued praising Maciel after Jose Barba, a Mexico City college professor, filed a 1998 case in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then led by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, seeking Maciel's ouster for abusing Barba and other youths in the Legion seminary. Ratzinger would go on to be elected to the papacy and take the name Benedict XVI,

As a cardinal, Ratzinger arguably came to know the multiple cases against Maciel as well as anyone. Although he initially blocked the case from going forward in the Vatican's legal machinery, he later reopened the investigation of Maciel. In 2006, the pope dismissed Maciel from ministry to a "life of prayer and penitence." In 2009, the Legion acknowledged Maciel had a daughter and apologized to the seminary abuse victims. Two sons have since come forward claiming they were Maciel's children by a different woman.

Well before the charges and revelations, Mee entrusted her finances to Maciel and the Legion: According to documents Silverstein quoted in a ruling last fall, Mee in 1998 visited the Legionaries center in Cheshire, Conn., and on Aug. 8 of that year gave the order a check for \$1 million. In 1991, she revised her will, giving 90 percent of her assets to the Legionaries. She also joined Regnum Christi that year and gave another \$3 million to the Legionaries.

"Her estate-planning documents were in the possession of the Legion in Rome," Jackvony said. "They breached their duty to her in trust and confidence."

As the 1998 allegations against Maciel in Ratzinger's tribunal sat dormant during the latter years of John Paul's papacy, Maciel was giving Mee advice on her financial investments. She gave Fr. Anthony Bannon, the Legion's North American territorial director, her power of attorney in 2000 and appointed him executor of her estate.

Bannon became more aggressive in pushing her to increase the flow of donations, but Fleet resisted the encroachment of Timothy Mee's trust. The Legionaries sued the bank in 2001, generating deposition testimony by Mee. The parties finally dropped the suit, which gave the Legion free access to the Mee fortune. "I preferred to put all my eggs in one basket than have it fragmented," Mee said in a deposition in the bank case the judge quoted in a recent ruling.

"I don't know if she was brainwashed, but Mrs. Mee was unduly influenced and defrauded," Jackvony said.

[Jason Berry, GlobalPost's religion correspondent, has been working with *National Catholic Reporter* on the Maciel story for several years and will be going through the just-released documents. *NCR* expects to publish what these court files reveal early next week. GlobalPost's religion blog, Belief, will be publishing excerpts of *NCR*'s reports as they come out.]

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