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Deposition shows Legion of Christ benefactor was dedicated to order

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 18, 2013
Legion of Christ investigation

Editor's note: Gabrielle Mee, a wealthy Rhode Island widow, directed tens of millions of dollars to the now-disgraced Legion of Christ between 1989 and her death in 2008. Among the volumes of court documents unsealed Friday in a lawsuit brought against the order is a July 12, 2001, deposition of Mee. In that deposition, Mee, who had just turned 90, describes her first contact with the order and her reasons for donating so profusely. This profile of Mee describes the benefactor in her own words as taken from that deposition, unless otherwise specified. See all stories in this series.[1]

For Gabrielle Mee, the Legion of Christ was a group of men uncommonly focused on serving God's people. In a continuing era of personnel shortages for the Catholic church, they seemed among an ever-decreasing number willing to take up a life of service as priests.

Mee, a native of the small Rhode Island city of Woonsocket on Massachusetts' southern and western borders, first heard of the Legion in August 1989.

Concerned about a shortage of active priests, she asked a friend at her Narragansett parish: "What are we going to do when we have no more?"

The friend mentioned the order, saying they had a "lot of vocations."

"Frankly, I caught fire," Mee said of that interaction. "I thought there must be some priests. So I got home and I called up my banker. I said, 'Find out everything you can about the Legionaries of Christ.' "

Visiting the Legion's formation center in Cheshire, Conn., sometime after talking with her friend, Mee liked what she saw.

"What impressed me so much was to see a chapel filled with all these young men in their cassocks," she said.

Mee's first meeting with Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the Legion's founder and duplicitous con-man who secretly fathered children and sexually abused young boys, would foreshadow a burgeoning financial and personal relationship with the order.

Meeting Maciel at the Legion's Connecticut facility sometime after first hearing of the order, the priest told Mee that while the Legion was "in a crunch" financially, it would "only ask God for what we need."

"And the angel Gabriel came down from heaven," Mee replied, referencing her first name, Gabrielle.

The reference to providence would be just the beginning of blessings the order would receive from the widow.

An Aug. 20, 1989, letter from Maciel to Mee thanks her for a $1 million donation for construction of a Legion seminary in Rome.

"I am deeply moved and very grateful for this extraordinary gift," Maciel wrote. "You have no idea how much good this act of generosity will produce for the church."

Perhaps sensing Mee's desire for an increase in the number of Catholic priests, Maciel also invited her to come to Rome on Jan. 3, 1991, for the seminary's inauguration, which was to include the ordination of 55 Legion priests.

"That the founder of The Legion of Christ has written to me is just overwhelming!" Mee replied in a September 1989 handwritten letter of response to Maciel, whom she addressed as "beloved Father."

"How profoundly soul satisfying are God's blessings!" she wrote, saying she would accept the invitation.

The $1 million gift would be the first of many. By July 25, 1990, a memo from Mee's bank recorded another gift to the Legion of about $3 million in cash and securities.

As the head of a charitable foundation and later trust in honor of her late husband, Timothy, a prominent Rhode Island banker who died in 1985, Mee would provide many more such gifts, eventually directing that 90 percent of her and the trust's holdings, totaling about $30 million, be given to the order at the time of her death.

For Mee, the focus on Catholic giving arose out of a life shaped by devotional practices common to devout U.S. Catholic families in the 1940s and '50s.

She and her husband would say the rosary together "every night." And Timothy, she said, "never missed a Mass. Never."

In the Legion, she said she found a group in which she could be "sure of what they were doing."

"I had extreme faith in what they were doing and they're proving today what they are doing," she said. "They're re-Christianizing the entire world."

While Mee may have had that dedication to the order in 2001, she raised questions about how her money was being used several times earlier.

Following a 1997 *Hartford Courant* news report by Gerald Renner and Jason Berry outlining accusations by nine men that Maciel had abused them as boys, Mee handwrote a letter to her banker in March 1998.

Mee's donations to the order came first from a foundation and then a trust named after her husband, which was managed by Fleet Investment Management. Fleet merged with Bank of America in 2004.

Her husband, Mee told the banker in 1998, "always took great care to ensure that the companies he invested in were not marking out cross-purpose with his moral and charitable goals." Mee asked for "written assurance" that the money given from his trust never be invested in such a way as to "contradict the moral principles or values taught by the Catholic Church."

Responding to her March 1998 letter, Dorothy Derick, one of Fleet's vice presidents, wrote to Maciel directly in September 1998 asking for the Legion's "concurrence" with Mee's request, for copies of the Legion's investment portfolio, and periodic review of its continuing holdings.

Such inquiries would continue for years, even after Mee's death.

In August 2010, after the Legion had acknowledged for the first time in a March press release that Maciel had taken "reprehensible actions," the vice president of Bank of America's philanthropic department, Vautina Franklin, emailed Fr. Jose Felix Ortega, a Legion priest who helped run the order's operations in Connecticut, asking if the order "continues to be faithful to the Holy Father."

While Ortega responded in December 2010 in another email referencing an attached letter from the Vatican on the matter, which he said would answer Franklin's inquiry, the Vatican letter has not surfaced in a review of the documents released Friday.

Besides her donations to the order, Mee also joined its lay arm, Regnum Christi, as a consecrated woman in November 1991.

Composed of separate groups for laywomen, laymen and diocesan priests, Regnum Christi is akin to a religious order and asks its members to profess vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

Its members can choose to become either first-, second- or third-degree members. Each layer of membership places additional responsibilities on members toward the order.

A March 25, 1992, certificate indicating her induction into its third degree of membership shows Mee was told her motto while in the order was to be "Whatever You say I will do. I will comply, through God's chosen instruments."

Additionally, she was to take a walk each day, have "arm exercises daily" and "obey ... my directors and those Nuestro Padre has sent as my angels."

Nuestro Padre, Spanish for "Our Father," was a title Legion members frequently used to refer to Maciel.

As a member of Regnum Christi, Mee was also expected to hand over her assets as part of her vow of poverty.

According to a 2007 copy of its 28-page statutes, all Regnum Christi third-degree members are to "renounce ... their licit right to use and exercise ownership over any material good without the permission of their legitimate directors."

Additionally, "anything a consecrated member acquires through his work or as a donation, and everything he receives as a salary, pension, grant or insurance, regardless of how it is obtained, is to be sent to the general fund of the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ."

And: "After fifteen years of consecrated life, a member is to donate half of his assets to the general fund, and after twenty-five years, all of his present and future assets."

Approving a version of those statutes in November 2004, the Vatican's congregation for religious life said they were a vision of Christ's kingdom.

"The Apostolic See warmly prays that the members of the Regnum Christi Movement by faithfully following these Statutes will make them a further and effective means to extend Christ's Kingdom in the world," wrote Cardinal Franc Rode, then the head of the congregation, in an official letter.

For her part, Mee said she had been considering religious life since she was a child, when the order of the Religious of Jesus and Mary, which to this day maintains a mission center in Woonsocket, asked her to join.

After her husband's death, she said, "I knew that I had to do something."

Regnum Christi, she said, "were doing much of what I'd been doing. I was a daily person going to Mass and I got to know a lot about them and I decided, well, that was the way I was going to go."

Her story, Mee said, ends: "And she lived happily ever since. Continuation of the bliss and happiness I had with my marriage with Tim. Joyful life. Very nice. Totally fulfilled."

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is **jmcelwee@ncronline.org** **[2]**.]

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