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Lay members meet to contribute to Regnum Christi's transformation

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Rome — Members of Regnum Christi, the lay movement associated with the Legionaries of Christ, said they don't feel they are on a salvage mission, but rather are part of a transformation.

They have been shocked and disillusioned by revelations that their movement's founder -- the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado -- fathered children and sexually abused seminarians, and they recognize that many more have been hurt by Maciel's actions. Yet they are frustrated by widespread doubts about the validity of the movement, which they still strongly believe can improve their own lives and the life of the church.

Brenner LeCompte, 28, entered the Legionaries' "apostolic school," a kind of minor seminary, when he was 15 and spent eight years with the Legionaries before deciding he was not called to the priesthood. LeCompte, who lives in Connecticut, told Catholic News Service he has checked out other movements, but "I haven't connected with anything else."

Now married with a new baby, he said he believes his involvement with Regnum Christi "is a vocation. I don't feel at home anywhere else."

LeCompte was one of 38 unconsecrated members of Regnum Christi chosen to represent perhaps as many as 30,000 of their peers from around the world at a June 6-9 meeting in Rome to discuss the identity of the movement and draft new regulations for their branch. They also joined the Legionaries and consecrated members for a novena to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a special feast day Mass on Friday, which included prayers for those who have left the movement and those who have been hurt by it, as well as prayers that love would characterize the renewal process.

The 950 priests of the Legion of Christ, the 670 consecrated laywomen and 85 consecrated laymen -- who make promises of poverty, chastity and obedience -- had already begun drafting their new constitutions, a move ordered by the Vatican after the extent of Maciel's depravity became clear.

Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, whom Pope Benedict appointed in 2010 to oversee the reform of the Legionaries and Regnum Christi, met with the 38 representatives on Thursday, apologizing that it had taken him so long to help them begin the process of defining their own place within the movement.

He said the delay was partly due to the fact that his attention was directed first to "larger problems," the "less beautiful part" of the movement. In fact, his work began with the leadership and constitutions of the Legion and the consecrated members. He called the unconsecrated lay branch "a very beautiful part" of the movement, in addition to being the largest part.

"Regnum Christi is a reality much wider than the Legion," the cardinal said.

Repeatedly over the past several months, the cardinal has referred to the Legionaries of Christ as part of Regnum Christi, rather than vice versa, and members of both groups have echoed that description.

Ever since the revelations about Maciel became public and Pope Benedict named De Paolis to oversee the movement's reform, many people -- including former members -- have asked if it really is possible for the movement to continue without a strong tie and continuing references to the founder.

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The cardinal told the lay representatives, "Many people see only the bad," but he wanted to look at the entire reality of the Regnum Christi movement and at the ongoing commitment of members who, like the church itself, believe evil will not be victorious and that darkness cannot overpower the light of God's love and gifts. "That has been your experience," he told them.

Kerrie Rivard, a 38-year-old representative from Atlanta, repeated an idea the cardinal and members have been affirming for years: the spiritual gift, or charism, that led to the founding of the Legion and Regnum Christi "was given to the church, not the founder."

"Father Maciel didn't live up to the charism, but a lot of others -- as Legionary priests, as lay people -- have lived up to it," she said. The founder's actions left "wounds in the church, in the Legion and in Regnum Christi that need healing and reparation."

But Rivard said she thought De Paolis had done a good job of explaining why she's still a member and committed to Regnum Christi's reform: "The history of the church isn't to throw out the good with the bad, but to purify it."

"That really resonated with me because it's sometimes frustrating, very frustrating," to try to explain to people, she said.

Rivard said she still is friends with many people who have left the movement. "The hurt is real -- it's there," she said, and she listens to them, apologizes for anything she may have done personally to cause them pain and looks at their experiences "so we don't make the same mistake in the future."

"That is part of our renewal," she said. At the end of the meeting, Rivard was one of four representatives

elected to a commission that will help draft the unconsecrated lay branch's statutes and represent members at meetings with De Paolis, with the Legionary leadership and with the consecrated members in the continuing discussions about how all the branches should work together.

LeCompte said he believes the unconsecrated lay members are "utterly essential" to Regnum Christi and its whole thrust of helping Catholics understand their faith and equipping them to be missionaries in the world.

As the reform process has gone on, he said, he feels the Legionaries have become "much more open" to seeing the lay members as partners. As for those who were hurt by their experience in the movement and left, he said, "I feel I have to be a voice for them, listen to the ways they were hurt and offer suggestions so that no one is hurt like that again."

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