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Editorial: Legion's record calls for criminal investigation

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Editorial

The Legion of Christ has been an agency of almost unimaginable fraud, and that reality alone should be reason for civil authorities to pursue a criminal investigation of its U.S. activities and for the church to proceed with extreme caution in considering allowing the group to continue.

The Legion, which was of many things but certainly not of Christ, was built on the life of a man, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, who trafficked in deception, lies and crimes against children. The nature and extent of his fraud was only beginning to be acknowledged by way of Vatican investigation in the last years of his life.

As Jason Berry reports [1], the Legion has been the target of two Rhode Island lawsuits alleging the order defrauded elderly donors who died without knowing what those seeking their fortunes knew only too well -- that the man they characterized as a saint had been accused multiple times of sexually abusing seminarians and ultimately was disciplined by the pope.

The first suit was dismissed on a technicality, but the judge did not pass up the opportunity to deliver a scathing judgment of the Legion and its tactics -- and to release thousands of pages of testimony and evidence in that case, which had been restricted from the public by a protective order the Legion had requested.

The dismissal of that suit is now pending appeal by the niece of the wealthy widow who gave millions to the Legion, never knowing that Maciel was a fraud.

The second lawsuit has just cleared a major hurdle in federal court with allegations that the Legion committed fraud and elderly abuse in duping a retired college professor out of more than $1 million.

Given what has emerged in those two cases -- a pattern of exploiting the devout faith of elderly Catholics unable to comprehend the degree of depravity exhibited by Maciel over the course of decades -- it seems reasonable that Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Kilmartin would be curious about what other fraud might have been perpetrated on an unsuspecting public. What we know is that the Legion required an enormous fundraising effort to sustain its operations. Those operations, kept afloat by a budget of hundreds of millions a year, included making certain that Maciel had ready cash available for his globetrotting and presumably to care for his two lovers and his children by those women.

There were, and are, undoubtedly men and women yet involved in the various structures of the Legion who stay on for noble reasons and with high intentions. That doesn't relieve church authorities of their responsibility to excise from the body a cancer that has seriously damaged the community.

For millennia, the church has absorbed religious movements and enthusiast groups of every sort. The Legion, however, is of another species entirely. It has no charism save for a fraud of a founder. Its relationship with the wider world and with the church is so tainted by corruption and lies that it is difficult to imagine justification for its continuation. That is a call Pope Francis will have to make. Based on the voluminous information about the

Legion that has come from many countries, the pope has not, in our view, been well-served by the work of Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, the canon lawyer appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as overseer of the Legion. Some of those who most enabled Maciel to perpetuate his deceptions remain in place, influencing the future life of the organization. The community has never publicly given an accounting for itself or dealt in any meaningful way with its past or the lies with which its members were either knowingly or unwittingly complicit.

On the civil side, the striking pattern of fraudulent fundraising tactics by a religious charity and the bilking of elderly Americans stands out as a matter demanding investigation. Elected officials should be aware by now that Catholics are as outraged as the rest by the scandalous behavior of some of our leaders. If the past is any indication, the revelations that have been forced out of the Legion by legal action are merely the beginning.

An investigation by law enforcement authority with subpoena powers would have a far greater chance of uncovering the truth of this outfit than Vatican authorities' still largely secretive steps. We know enough in this instance to say that a criminal investigation could not be construed as an anti-Catholic activity. It is, quite to the contrary, a public act for the common good. The Legion sought favor with the wider community, sought its trust and resources, by trading on an image that was light years from the truth.

We deserve to know how the Legion's duplicity went unchecked for so long and how far such institutional behavior reached. How many others were deceived? We know from past experience that getting full accounts of the criminal activity of church leaders is only possible when civil authorities intervene with the power to demand evidence and testimony. The Legion has provided abundant reason for such intervention. We call on the Rhode Island attorney general to open a criminal investigation of the Legion of Christ.

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