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Legion of Christ unveils measures to respond to sex abuse by members

Tom Roberts | Dec. 5, 2013

The Legion of Christ, a religious order of priests still dealing with the fallout from revelations of sexual abuse by its disgraced founder, announced Thursday that a recent investigation has uncovered "significant evidence of sexual abuse" by another Legion official who served as the order's novice master at its Cheshire, Conn., seminary.

At the same time, the order issued a summary of actions it has taken in addressing other cases of alleged sexual abuse by its priests, as well as a long letter from Fr. Sylvester Heereman, the order's acting general director, detailing the Legion's approach to dealing with the issue of sexual abuse.

The announcements come just ahead of an extraordinary general chapter at which the Legion will elect new leaders and approve a new constitution. The general chapter is to open in Rome Jan. 8 and is expected to run about a month.

In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI appointed Cardinal Velasio De Paolis to govern the order as it and Regnum Christi, its lay branch, underwent reform and reorganization. The January general chapter is the culmination of that reformation processes.

Fr. William Izquierdo was accused of sexual abuse of a minor while serving as novice master, a position he held from 1982 to 1994. Fr. Luis Garza, territorial director of the Legion for North America, said he received the accusation in July 2012.

"In addition to immediately reporting to local authorities, the Legion commissioned Praesidium Inc., to provide a thorough, independent investigation" that concluded in August, Garza said. In a letter addressed to all Legionaries in North American, he said the investigation "revealed significant evidence of sexual abuse." The findings were analyzed in October by the Legion's North American Review Board.

Praesidium is a Texas-based firm that specializes in what it calls "abuse risk management." It is the company that the U.S. Conference of Major Superiors of Men recommends to its members needing assistance with matters of sex abuse.

The information volunteered about Izquierdo is evidence of a degree of transparency new to the Legion, which operated with great secrecy and for years defended its founder, Fr. Marciel Maciel Degollado, against an increasing chorus of accusations of sexual abuse by former seminarians and priests of the order.

Maciel, a favorite of the late Pope John Paul II, who celebrated the native of Mexico as exemplary of the priestly vocation and, on one occasion, as "an efficacious guide to youth," denied any wrongdoing. He had powerful friends in the Vatican and among the Curia who protected him from investigation and church juridical processes.

It was only at the end of John Paul's life and in the early months of Benedict XVI's tenure that a Vatican

investigation gathered evidence confirming the extent of his abusive behavior. Maciel was disciplined in 2006 and died two years later.

Since then, the order has been in a kind of receivership and has been restructured under Vatican supervision.

In his letter, Garza said the Legion has received another allegation against the 85-year-old Izquierdo, who has been in poor health and was "diagnosed with an advanced state of dementia." Izquierdo has not exercised ministry since 2008, according to Garza, and he "is and was unable to respond to questions about the allegations." Garza said the second allegation is under investigation and that the accused priest is being moved to an assisted living facility.

"Although he could not participate in the investigation," Garza wrote, "after reviewing the information, we have no reason to doubt that sexual abuse with a minor actually occurred. We have also informed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

The summary of actions taken states that 35 Legion priests have been accused of sexual abuse of minors. Of those, 14 have been acquitted as having engaged in "imprudent behavior" or because the accusations were unfounded; nine have been found guilty, including Maciel; two have been "ineligible for canonical investigation when the allegation was presented"; and 10 are still under review. The two were ineligible because they had already left the priesthood, according to the order. The imprudent behavior was determined not to be of a criminal nature, the order said.

Of the nine who were found guilty, two were laicized and "seven had sanctions imposed on their life and ministry," according to Heereman.

Six Legion superiors, including Maciel, were accused of sexually abusing adults under their authority, according to the summary. Of those, three were acquitted and "one freely accepted restrictions on ministry as a precaution"; and three, including Maciel, were found guilty.

The release notes that the numbers mean less than 1 percent of the 1,133 priests ordained in the history of the congregation have been found guilty of sexual abuse.

In his letter, Heereman said the announcement about Izquierdo "confronts us with the painful and horrifying reality of sexual abuse of minors by members of our congregation."

In a section on understanding "the seriousness of sexual abuse and the suffering of victims," he thanks "those who have broken the silence that usually surrounds sexual abuse because of the shame and suffering that accompany it. Their voices have prompted us to seek the truth about what happened in order to help the victims and to renew our determination to prevent this from happening in the future."

The letter also notes that "many of us in the Legion maintained the founders innocence," a view that changed, he said, as "undeniable evidence of aspects of his hidden life began to come to light."

In January 2011, a pontifical delegate assigned to oversee restructuring of the Legion, established an Outreach Commission to deal with Maciel's victims if they wished to contact the order. Of those who did contact the commission, proposals were developed for "how the Legion could help them overcome their wounds and face the difficulties of their present life."

All of the cases have been closed, Heereman said, and a "conclusive report" will be submitted to the general chapter of the order which will open next month.

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