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Vatican investigators, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, from Malta, left, and Monsignor Jordi Bertomeu, from Spain, walk outside of the Nunciatura Apostolica during a break from meeting with people who allege abuse by the Catholic lay group Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (SCV) in Lima, Peru, Tuesday, July 25, 2023. The investigators began an audit of the SCV with interrogations of its representatives, alleged victims and journalists who have investigated charges against the brotherhood of alleged sexual abuse and financial corruption. (AP Photo/Martin Mejia)

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Lima, Peru — July 26, 2023
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Two key Vatican investigators have begun an audit in Peru's capital of a secretive Roman Catholic society with chapters across South America and in the U.S. following allegations that its founder sexually molested young recruits.

Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna and Monsignor Jordi Bertomeu, from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, questioned the society's spokespeople along with alleged abuse victims and journalists who have written on the case. July 25's questioning took place in the Apostolic Nunciature in Lima.

The scandal at the Peru-based Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, or Sodalitium of Christian Life, has close parallels to other cases of charismatic Catholic leaders in Latin America being accused of sex abuse — as well as the church dragging its feet on investigating claims and trying to keep scandals quiet.

Founded in 1971, Sodalitium has a presence in schools and churches and runs retreat facilities with communities in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Italy and the United States. Its members are mostly lay Catholics but also include clergy, including two bishops in Peru. The allegations date back to the 1990s.

Before this latest investigation, Scicluna and Bertomeu in 2018 looked into decades of sexual abuse by the Chilean Catholic Church, an investigation that led to the resignation of all Chilean bishops and the resignation of the Archbishop of Santiago, Ricardo Ezzati, in 2019.

"Scicluna and Bertomeu are the Van Helsing of pedophiles within the Catholic Church, they are monster hunters," Pedro Salinas, a Peruvian journalist who authored the book "No News from God," which was published last year. He was the first to testify on July 25.

Salinas has been publicly accusing society founder Luis Fernando Figari, now 76, since 2010 of physical, psychological and sexual abuse.

Upon leaving the questioning, the 60-year-old Salinas was emotional remembering that he was a member of the Sodalitium as a teenager. He says he suffered physical and psychological abuse and an incident with sexual connotations. He added that dozens of people who suffered abuse see the investigators as their last chance to achieve justice.

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"It’s like the last letter, the silver bullet, to see if this institution continues to exist or if they dissolve it," he said.

Another interviewee by the Vatican envoys was the Peruvian journalist Paola Ugaz, who met at the end of 2022 with Pope Francis in the Vatican. Ugaz co-authored a book on the society called "Half-Monks, Half Soldiers" in 2015.

Sodalitium said in a statement last weekend that "they have been summoned to these meetings with the envoys of the Holy Father." It added that it "will participate and collaborate in all the requirements that are requested."

In past statements, the society said that Figari, who is not a priest and has stepped down as Sodaltium’s head, insists he is innocent, though it notes he hasn’t said so publicly. It has called the allegations in "Half Monks, Half Soldiers" plausible.

Salinas told the AP on July 25 that the Vatican investigation also involves the finances of the secular group that could exceed $1 billion in businesses including "agro-export companies, universities, schools, cemeteries, construction companies and others."

Scicluna and Bertomeu left the Apostolic Nunciature in Lima alone July 25 to walk for a moment through nearby streets. When asked for comment on their work in Lima by The Associated Press, they both replied that they could not.

The Peruvian Press Council, Reporters Without Borders and the Nobel Prize for Literature winner Mario Vargas Llosa have criticized the judicial harassment suffered by Ugaz and Salinas by people linked to the Sodalitium.

Another Peruvian journalist, Daniel Yovera, who has also investigated the society, was accused of defamation in 2019, but the case expired in June.