News

People hold a banner that reads "Comunione e Liberazione" standing before the pillars in St. P

A banner promoting the Communion and Liberation ecclesial movement is seen installed across the Bernini colonnades in St. Peter's square at the Vatican. The international organization was established in 1954 by Fr. Luigi Giussani. Communion and Liberation is considered a missionary community with active lay involvement in 90 countries. (OSV News photo/Tenan, Wikipedia Commons CC-SA 3.0)

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An ecclesial movement has just admitted its former U.S. leader has been credibly accused of sexual and psychological abuse against young adults and minors over more than two decades.

Christopher Bacich, who headed up Communion and Liberation in the U.S. from March 2007 until August 2013, was the "sole perpetrator" of abuse against "multiple victims," according to an Oct. 31 statement issued by Fr. Michael Carvill, the movement's current head, and Steve Brown, president of the New York-based Human Adventure Corporation, a nonprofit that coordinates the movement's activities in the U.S.

Communion and Liberation, launched in 1954 by Italian Catholic educator Fr. Luigi Giovanni Giussani, fosters small, informal communities in some 90 countries that gather for prayer, charitable works, pilgrimages, and the exploration of arts and culture as a path to deeper faith. Formally recognized in 1982 as an association of pontifical right, the movement has enjoyed support from Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis.

In their statement, Carvill, who is a member of the movement's Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, and Brown said the incidents of abuse took place between 1997 and 2018. The allegations were reported in 2018 to the board of the Human Adventure Corporation and to Fr. Jose Medina, who at the time was the movement's U.S. director. The movement's leadership then retained a law firm to investigate the allegations, and ultimately deemed them credible.

"The proper ecclesial authorities and law enforcement were duly notified of the reports received and, to our knowledge, no criminal charges have been filed to date," said the statement.

In March 2019, Medina sent a letter to movement leaders in the U.S. to advise them of the investigation results and to state that Bacich would be barred from all further Communion and Liberation activities. Bacich, who denied wrongdoing, resigned from the movement. After his departure, two additional reports -- also deemed substantiated -- were made against Bacich, who declined to participate in the investigations, which were concluded several weeks ago, according to an email sent to OSV News by David Hazen, press secretary for the Human Adventure Corporation.

In their statement, Carvill and Brown admitted that the movement shared some of the blame for the victims' pain.

"If certain evils happened within our community, they did so partly because the environment lacked safeguards specifically designed to detect and prevent such abuse," they said in the statement.

They also said they were "deeply saddened that, at times, those to whom concerns were reported were slow to believe and respond to the accounts presented to them."

Over the past year, Carvill and the movement's president, Davide Prosperi, met with the victims, said the statement.

In August 2020, the movement published its safe environment policy, which requires adults working directly with minors "to pass periodic background checks, complete approved child protection training on a regular basis and abide by a code of conduct," said the statement.

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The movement has also established a safe environment committee to investigate complaints, the statement said.

The U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" has required such protocols of dioceses and eparchies since 2002. However, movements such as Communion and Liberation were not subject to the charter. In 2021, Pope Francis promulgated changes to canon law that permit the canonical prosecution of laypeople who abuse a position of church authority -- but there is no lookback window for crimes committed prior to the promulgation.

Hazen said in his email to OSV News that his organization "[does] not have any record of a background check" that it conducted for Bacich.

"These were not required for adults working with youth in [Communion and Liberation] until the creation of the Policy for the Protection of Minors in 2020," Hazen wrote. "Prior to that, members were expected to adhere to the requirements in force in their respective dioceses. However, background checks were likely conducted by the dioceses in which Mr. Bacich was employed as a teacher."

As a former high school teacher and a current college lecturer, Bacich has had substantial contact with youth and young adults outside of the Communion and Liberation movement.

A 2013 Facebook post by the movement's Kansas City, Kansas, group described Bacich as a "veteran high school teacher" who had been "involved in the education of youth and adults for more than 15 years." That post said that Bacich was the "founder and president of the Risk of Education Student Center in Manhattan, which attempts to assist young people find and affirm a lasting experience of human happiness."

An undated post on a webpage for Communion and Liberation's youth organization, Gioventu' Studentesca ("Young Students"), said that Bacich had founded the group in the U.S., having been a teacher in Xaverian High School, a private Catholic school in Brooklyn, New York.

"Chris started inviting some of his young students to hang around with him, go on hikes, trips and vacations," said the website. "As the friendship between him and those kids grew deeper, more and more kids started to join this new experience."

OSV News was awaiting a response from Xaverian High School officials to a request asking them to verify if Bacich had been employed there and if a background check had been conducted as part of the hiring process.

OSV News also attempted to reach Bacich directly via email, using addresses apparently associated with him at two California universities. As of Nov. 2, OSV News had not received a response.