Vatican
Vatican News



Vatican investigators Monsignor Jordi Bertomeu, right, from Spain, and Archbishop Charles Scicluna, from Malta, walk outside the Nunciatura Apostolica during a break from meeting with people who alleged abuse by the Catholic lay group Sodalitium Christianae Vitae in Lima, Peru, on July 25, 2023. (AP/Martin Mejia, File)

Nicole Winfield

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The Vatican on Wednesday expelled the founder of an influential Peruvian religious movement, the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, after the Catholic hierarchy spent more than a decade of downplaying allegations of sexual and psychological abuse and financial corruption against him and his community.

The decree against Luis Fernando Figari came after Pope Francis last year ordered an investigation into the Sodalitium by the Vatican's top sex abuse experts to get to the bottom of the scandal. Previous commissions and investigations had failed to fully address the group's problems.

According to the decree by the Vatican's department for religious orders, which was posted on the website of the Peruvian bishops conference, Francis gave his explicit authorization to expel Figari from the movement, even though canon law didn't precisely cover his alleged misconduct.

Figari's behavior was "incompatible and therefore unacceptable in a member of a church institution, as well as causing scandal and serious damage to the good of the church and of the individual members of the faithful," it said. The expulsion would restore justice harmed by Figari's behavior "over many years, and would protect in the future the individual good of the faithful and the church," it said.

Figari founded the movement in 1971 as a lay community to recruit "soldiers for God," one of several Catholic societies born as a conservative reaction to the left-leaning liberation theology movement that swept through Latin America, starting in the 1960s. At its height, the group counted about 20,000 members across South America and the United States. It was enormously influential in Peru.

Victims of Figari's abuse complained to the Lima archdiocese in 2011, though other claims against him reportedly date to 2000. But neither the local church nor the Holy See took concrete action until one of the victims, Pedro Salinas, wrote a book along with journalist Paola Ugaz detailing the twisted practices of the Sodalitium in 2015, entitled "Half Monks, Half Soldiers."

The Sodalitium later commissioned an outside investigation that found Figari was “narcissistic, paranoid, demeaning, vulgar, vindictive, manipulative, racist, sexist, elitist and obsessed with sexual issues and the sexual orientation" of Sodalitium's members.

The outside investigation, published in 2017, found that Figari sodomized his recruits and forced them to fondle him and one another. He liked to watch them “experience pain, discomfort and fear,” and humiliated them in front of others to enhance his control over them, the report found.

Still, the Holy See declined to expel Figari from the movement in 2017 and merely ordered him to live apart from the Sodalitium community in Rome and cease all contact with it. The Vatican was seemingly tied in knots by canon law that did not foresee such punishments for founders of religious communities who weren't priests. At the time Salinas called it a “golden exile.”

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On Wednesday, Salinas called Figari's definitive expulsion good news.

“I hope it is the beginning of more important news that will culminate in the suppression of this mafia-like sect,” he told The Associated Press.

It remains unclear if any more decisions about the Sodalitium, which controls significant economic interests, would follow.

However, the expulsion puts into question the very foundation and continued existence of the Sodalitium, since such religious movements are always tightly bound to their founder and his or her original inspiration for the movement.

The Sodalitium, for its part, distanced itself from Figari in a statement Wednesday, welcoming the decision to expel him and saying it had wanted him expelled back in 2019. The group insisted it was undergoing a renewal process that will allow it to continue without Figari or his influence.

“Figari is the historical founder of the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, but he is not a spiritual reference for our community,” the current superior, José David Correa González, said in a statement. “We want to continue to work so that this gift may be

at the service of the evangelizing mission of the church.”

Such a sentiment is similar to the one espoused by the Legion of Christ religious order. The Vatican in 2010 opted to put the Mexican order through a Vatican-mandated process of reform rather than suppressing it after determining that its founder, the Rev. Marcial Maciel, was a pedophile, drug addict and religious fraud who built a cult-like movement to hide his double life.

Figari's expulsion is the second personnel step by Francis after the Vatican's abuse investigators — the Rev. Jordi Bertomeu and Archbishop Charles Scicluna — returned from Peru last year. In April, Francis accepted the resignation of a Peruvian archbishop and Sodalitium member, Piura Archbishop José Eguren, who had sued Salinas and Ugaz over their reports about the Sodalitium.

In addition to Figari’s own abuses, their reporting had exposed the alleged forced eviction of peasants on lands in Eguren’s diocese by a Sodalitium-linked real estate developer.

In comments to AP, Ugaz called the decision to expel Figari of “paramount importance” since it exposed how the Peruvian church — with a few exceptions — “did nothing to listen to the victims who have been denouncing the Sodalitium since 2000.”

She said it was also a validation of journalism “and perhaps it will serve to give reparations to their victims.”