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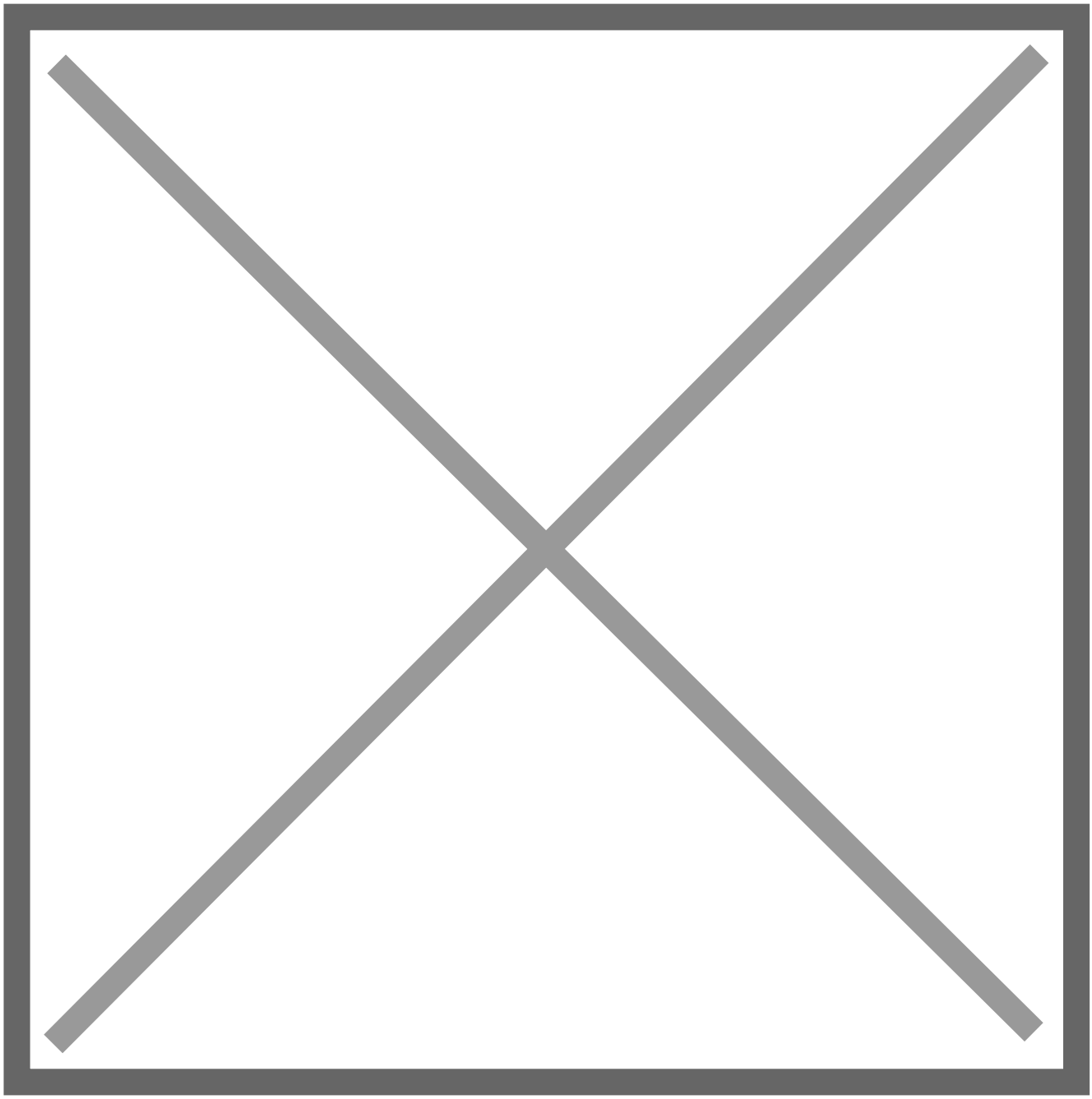

Pope Leo XIV gives a blessing during a meeting with members of the General Chapter of the Legionaries of Christ at the Vatican Feb. 19, 2026. Pope Leo reminded the members that exercising governance and authority is meant as a service and not as a means to control others. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Mario Tomassetti)

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Pope Leo XIV reminded members of the Legionaries of Christ that exercising governance and authority is meant as a service and not as a means to control others.

In his Feb. 19 address to participants of the religious congregation's General Chapter, the pope said that authority in religious life should serve as a means of "animating common life" centered on Christ, while "avoiding any form of control that does not respect the dignity and freedom of persons."

"Authority in religious life is not understood as domination, but as spiritual and fraternal service to those who share the same vocation," he said. "Its exercise must be manifested in the 'art of accompaniment,' learning to remove one's sandals before the sacred ground of the other."

The Legionaries of Christ was founded in Mexico by the late-Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

In May 2006, following an investigation into allegations that Maciel sexually abused seminarians, led by Archbishop Charles Scicluna of the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican announced it had sanctioned the Mexican priest and asked him to renounce celebrating public Masses and live a life of penance.

After his death in 2008, it was revealed that Maciel had sexually abused dozens of children over several decades. In 2010, the Vatican announced that Maciel was guilty of "the very grave and objectively immoral actions" and "real crimes," and had lived a "life devoid of scruples and of genuine religious meaning."

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A 2025 HBO docuseries "Marcial Maciel: The Wolf of God" — detailing the founder's disturbing past, which included abuses, drug addiction and fathering children whom he also sexually abused — centered on 2024 revelations that Maciel's crimes were known by the Vatican as far back as the 1950s.

According to the archives of Pope Pius XII, which were opened in 2020, the Vatican was poised to take action against Maciel in 1956 and was planning to remove him from the priesthood. However, upon Pius XII's death in 1958, Maciel's allies took advantage of the leadership vacuum to clear his name, The Associated Press reported.

Welcoming the Legionaries to the Vatican, the pope said the congregation's General Chapter was "a privileged moment for communal discernment and listening to the Holy Spirit."

However, he also acknowledged the religious group's past, noting that the members are "heirs to a charism" that has grown through various "historical expressions" that were "sometimes painful and not without crisis."

"This shared memory does not look only to the past, but also impels constant renewal in the present, faithful to the Gospel," he said.

Nevertheless, he continued, the charism entrusted to the Legionaries is "a gift of the Holy Spirit" that must be "received with gratitude and consolation."

"Remember, therefore, that you are not the owners of the charism, but its custodians and servants," the pope said. "You are called to give your lives so that this gift may continue to bear fruit in the Church and in the world."

Leo said that the Legionaries' mission of offering a "visible testimony of mutual listening and joint search for God's will" requires "humility to listen, inner freedom to

express oneself sincerely, and openness to accepting collective discernment."

"I urge you to continue living in an attitude of prayer, humility, and inner freedom. Do not pursue personal or regional interests, nor seek mere organizational solutions, but above all, the will of God for your religious family and for the mission the Church has entrusted to you," the pope said.