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Baltimore archbishop demands greater accountability from Legionaries of Christ

by John L. Allen Jr.

O'Brien says he will ban the Legionaries if they fail to comply

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
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Demanding what he calls greater "transparency and accountability" from the controversial religious order known as Legionaries of Christ and their associated lay movement, Regnum Christi, Archbishop Edward O'Brien of Baltimore has directed both groups to disclose all activities within his archdiocese, and to refrain from one-on-one spiritual direction with anyone under 18.

The ban on counseling minors, O'Brien said in an interview with NCR on Wednesday, is related to concerns that the Legionaries and Regnum Christi practice "heavily persuasive methods on young people, especially high schoolers, regarding vocations."

Both the Legionaries of Christ, a religious order of priests, and the lay-led Regnum Christi are typically seen as part of a galaxy of "new movements" within Catholicism. Both are known for missionary zeal, as well as staunch traditionalism in faith and practice.

In a June 11 interview on the margins of the spring meeting of the U.S. bishops in Orlando, Florida, O'Brien said he's prepared to take the "next step" of barring the Legionaries and Regnum Christi from the archdiocese entirely if they do not comply.

The directives came in the form of a June 6 letter from O'Brien to Fr. Alvaro Corcuera Martínez del Río, the Superior General of the Legionaries. They cap a lengthy series of contacts between the Legionaries

and the Baltimore archdiocese, O'Brien said, which began under his predecessor, Cardinal William Henry Keeler, who resigned in July 2007 at the age of 76.

In a two-page letter, O'Brien instructed Corcuera to appoint a Legionary priest who can serve as a liaison with the Baltimore archdiocese. That priest, O'Brien wrote, must provide:

- The names and ministries of all Legionary priests in the archdiocese;
- Identification of all Regnum Christi groups in the archdiocese, including their activities and methods of recruitment;
- Identification of all youth programs connected to the Legionaries or Regnum Christi, again including their activities and recruitment methods;
- Identification of all other activities connected to the Legionaries and Regnum Christi, including their location and the frequency of their meetings.

O'Brien wrote that the priest-liaison should inform all pastors of parishes where groups connected to the Legionaries or Regnum Christi are active, and keep pastors informed about any changes in those activities.

With a specific eye to work with youth, O'Brien directed that the archdiocese is to be informed of any summer programs for young people run by the Legionaries or Regnum Christi, including the names of participants. He also asked to be notified of candidates for the priesthood or religious life from the archdiocese who intend to enter a Legionary high school seminary or boarding school, saying that the information will be reviewed with the parents and pastors of those candidates.

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I want to ensure that encouragement of vocations is carried out in a way that respects the rights of parents in the upbringing of their children and the rights of young persons themselves to be able to make free and fully informed decisions about their futures," O'Brien wrote.

Finally, O'Brien asked to be updated every six months about the activities and objectives of Legionary and Regnum Christi groups in the archdiocese.

The full text of O'Brien's letter to Corcuera can be found here:

<http://www.archbalt.org/news/upload/Corcuera-Letter-From-Abp-OBrien-06-06-08.pdf>

Both the Legionaries of Christ, a religious order of priests, and the lay-led Regnum Christi are typically seen as part of a galaxy of "new movements" within Catholicism. Both are known for missionary zeal, as well as staunch traditionalism in faith and practice.

The Legionaries have long been controversial, in part due to allegations of sexual abuse against the order's late founder, Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, made by former members. Both Maciel and the Legionaries denied those charges, but in the wake of a lengthy Vatican investigation, Maciel was asked in 2006 to observe a life of "prayer and penance."

The June 6 letter, O'Brien told NCR, represents a last-ditch effort to repair relations. O'Brien said he actually reached a decision two to three months ago to ask the Legionaries and Regnum Christi to leave the archdiocese, but was persuaded to stay his hand by three Vatican cardinals who asked him to meet first with Corcuera.

That meeting, O'Brien said, took place earlier in June.

In the NCR interview, O'Brien also expressed skepticism that the Legionaries will be able to implement needed reforms until they come to terms with seemingly persuasive evidence that Maciel, the founder, engaged in activity that was "less than honorable, and maybe even sinful."

Excerpts from the NCR interview with O'Brien can be found at the end of this article.

Baltimore is not the first American diocese in which the Legionaries and Regnum Christi have generated controversy. Most notably, Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese effectively expelled the Legionaries in late 2004.

Counting 750 priests, 2,500 seminarians and more than 70,000 lay members, the Legionaries of Christ and Regnum Christi are currently active in over 40 countries around the world.

Interview with Archbishop Edwin O'Brien

June 11, 2008

Can you describe what led you to issue this letter?

When I came into the archdiocese, I was told by our Vicar General that there had been a long series of exchanges between the cardinal and the locals of the Legionaries about programs going on in the archdiocese that our pastors didn't know about, didn't know the extent of them, didn't know the nature of them. There were seemingly heavily persuasive methods used on young people, high schoolers especially, regarding vocations.

Have the Legionaries generated a lot of vocations in Baltimore?

I don't know. Once again, we don't know. They have the Woodmont school in our archdiocese. [Note: The Woodmont Academy is a private K-8 Catholic school with an enrollment of over 300 located in Cooksville, Maryland.] Academically, they're abiding by all the expectations of our Superintendent of Education. We've got no problems there.

But what goes on in the one-on-one counseling? There seems to be a tendency to say, "We represent God. You can tell us anything, and you better believe that what we tell you is from God too. If your parents disagree, we know better. We're in the God business, and they're really not." This is a caricature, but it's there.

They sponsor father/son weekends. The father drives 14 hours, brings the kid up to New Hampshire and drops the kid off at 11:00 at night. Where's the father going to stay? Well, there's a place about 40 miles away you can stay, so the father's sleeping in the car overnight. Next day they're ready for the hike, but no, the fathers don't go, it's just the counselors and the kids. That's the tendency.

Who's in charge of this? Who's responsible? Each time you meet with an official, [they say], "Oh, no, that didn't happen, did it? You should have let us know right away. That's not right." But it happens over and over again.

Are these activities organized by Regnum Christi?

Regnum Christi, yes. I'm really talking about Regnum Christi all the way through here. To what extent the priests are involved? The Legionaries of Christ are a religious order. My thought is that where lay people are involved, it's called Regnum Christi. The priests are there for spiritual direction. Who's

setting the agenda? Obviously the priests are, but they're very clever with their organization. They have several different corporations, and we can't figure out which is which. As far as property goes, responsibility for various organizations, the Legionaries stay pretty far away on the books, though practically speaking they're very much involved.

There's a lack of transparency, as I've called it. I've met some extraordinarily fine members of Regnum Christi. They'll talk about what had happened before they met Regnum Christi. Every priest they went to, they got a different story about what the church taught, and then finally they got it [from the Legionaries]. What they're hearing usually is right. But it's the tactics that get you. The question is, will some of these very good people be disenchanted someday? For that matter, should they be disenchanted now? Do they know all the facts? I don't know. I'm not in there to break up Regnum Christi, I'm in there just to see that Regnum Christi is as accountable as every other group should be to the ordinary of the diocese.

What kind of response have you had to the letter?

I know Fr. Alvaro [Corcuera, Superior General of the Legionaries of Christ] from my days in Rome as rector [of the North American College.] He's always been very cordial. I got calls from some very highly placed people in Rome when they heard this was going on, some cardinals, asking me not to do anything until I spoke with Fr. Alvaro. They said he'd take the next plane over here if I wanted. I said no, we'd wait until his next trip, which was this past week. It was cordial.

He's in a tough spot, taking over after Maciel [Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries.] I think he's trying to straighten a number of things out. I think he's been told to straighten a number of things out, and I want to give him a chance.

I've always suspected the flaws in the organization are endemic to it. There's no remedying them, because it's so deeply ingrained. There's a sense of secrecy right from the seminary. The seminarians move two-by-two wherever they go. If one criticizes anything about the institution, the other one has to report it. ? All this flows into Regnum Christi as well. Nothing happens in Regnum Christi without the Legionaries.

I had been thinking that this endemic, but this [the letter and the Legionaries' response] will prove the case. I hope I'm wrong. I hope they can be at ease in working with the ordinary of the diocese, before the ordinary has to come in and say ?I don't want you in my archdiocese at all,? as Archbishop Flynn did.

Have you spoken with other bishops who have had experiences with the Legionaries and with Regnum Christi?

I did, briefly. Our chancellor has called, I guess, maybe half a dozen other chanceries involved. They can almost finish the sentence, every sentence. It's the exact same tactic everywhere. It gets me, because these are good, solid clergy I'm speaking with in the Legionaries, but they all seem to be so surprised all the time. Now if they're really convinced that they have been misled, there's something about their judgment that has to be called into question.

Could one say the same thing about their judgment of Fr. Maciel himself?

When I speak to the Legionary priests, they just shake their heads. There's no attempt to defend [Maciel]. Within the community, however, I think they do [defend him]. Their whole thing is that any setback, any challenge, any obstacle is part of the cross we bear, and we're going to grow as a result.

That was the language of their statement after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's action regarding Fr. Maciel was made public.

That's why at the core of the whole operation, I'm just wondering if there's not a flaw that allows such

blind allegiance and operations to continue. I'd love to know, for example, the percentage of priests who stay after ordination. Everything is reported ? there?s nothing said even in passing to a Legionary by someone like myself that?s not recorded and reported to someone in authority.

Do you believe that any reform in the Legionaries has to involve coming to terms with the charges against Fr. Maciel?

It?s got to be faced. They really have to face it. First of all, they have to come to grips with it themselves, within their own community of Legionaries. They have to squarely face it. They need to be able to say, ?The evidence seems to be that this man engaged in some activities that were less than honorable, and maybe even sinful.? Of course, I don?t know what the evidence is, but ?

One presumes that the CDF would not have reached the judgment it did without compelling evidence.

Absolutely. Without facing that, I think it casts a pall over any other objectivity, any other integrity, they claim to put forth as their qualifications to deal with lay people and with the Catholic church in general.

You asked in your letter of June 6 that the Legionaries appoint a priest to be a liaison with you and the archdiocese. Has that happened yet?

Yes.

Who is it?

It?s the superior in Washington. I just got word on it this morning, so I don?t even know his name. Fr. Alvaro was completely open to everything we asked. In fact, here?s how it started. I had this letter, and he hadn?t seen it. No one knew about it except our own inner sanctum. Fr. Raymond Cosgrave was with him. He?s really [Corcuera]’s right-hand man. He was over here a couple of months ago to talk about these things. That?s when I said, ?I think it?s at the core of things and the whole operation is irremediable. No matter how much we speak, we always come back to the same point.? I told him, ?You mention the Legionaries of Christ to most groups of diocesan priests, and it?s the same reaction everywhere. It?s not just us and it?s not just me.?

We sat down again with Fr. Raymond the other day, who accompanied Fr. Alvaro. After Fr. Alvaro said a few things, Fr. Raymond said, ?If only you would appoint a liaison we could work with. We’ll appoint a liaison, and he will follow every step that you suggest. If only you would give us a list of the things you want us to do, specifics.? Well, it was already in the letter, though they hadn?t seen it yet. They were asking for it. I didn?t expect that. When I showed it to them, I think they were relieved.

I think that if we’re going to have a shot at this, if it?s going to work, it will depend upon Fr. Alvaro. He said he?s working on things, but I said, ?Father, it has to get down to the grassroots. It?s got to get down to the school up there, and to [activities in] New Hampshire and Rhode Island. We can’t wait forever for that to happen, for the seepage to take place and people get the message three years later. Fr. Alvaro said he?s working on doing that, getting the word out to everybody.

What that word will be, I don?t know. It?s going to be very hard for them to acknowledge Maciel, because Alvaro and Maciel were very close.

You also directed that they’re not to engage in one-on-one spiritual direction with anyone under 18. Are you satisfied that they’re prepared to comply with that?

They say they are. I think they see the handwriting on the wall. If they don?t, we’ll just have to take

another step.

What would that other step be?

To do what St. Paul-Minneapolis did. That would be tough, because they've got a huge investment in that school out there. I don't want to hurt the people, and that's what the upshot would be. I want to give them every chance. I think they were walking along with us as we discussed things, they saw what our concern was ? among other things, that there is undue influence on the part of Legionaries over very impressionable young people that not even parents have. That's just not fair. If the parents don't realize it, we have to awaken them to it, or at least speak up for the innocent one.

This is serious enough and important enough to you that if they don't comply, you would be willing to take that next step of barring them from the archdiocese?

I think we'd have to.

Were there any specific incidents that led to the issuance of this letter?

No, it was just on-going stalling and lack of a real sense of cooperation. Those who are out of the Legion say that they will always yield to authority, and they themselves say that openly. One told me, "You tell us tomorrow to pack up and get out of here, we will pack up and get out of here, and I assure you that you will not get one nasty letter from any Regnum Christi member. That's the way we are."

Short of that, however, what you get is an impression of total obedience to the church, but with a "but." The impression is, "We're the Legion, we do things a little differently, and the bishop really doesn't understand. Also the priests don't understand, because we're Legionary priests, and the Holy See has established us to do certain things." There's that kind of looking down on others, belittling them.

The Legionaries are not the only group that has attracted this kind of attention over the years. Some of what you've said is reminiscent of things said not so long ago about Opus Dei, for example. Do you think there's something unique about the Legionaries?

I don't have to deal much with Opus Dei. To my knowledge, Opus Dei is not that active in Baltimore. Even when I see them active, I find among the Opus Dei priests a lot more transparency and accountability.

Has that always been the case?

I remember years ago when I was in the New York chancery ? the Holy See sends out forms each year for the Annuario [Note: the Vatican's annual statistical yearbook of the church], and each year they change. One in particular wanted to know about the religious in the archdiocese, how many are there and so on. The only one I couldn't get word from was Opus Dei. They said, "We just don't give that information out." I said, "Cardinal Cooke wants it." They said, "I'm sorry, the Holy See has exempted us from those things." I don't think that happens anymore with Opus Dei.

Opus Dei was founded in the late 1920s and the Legionaries in the 1950s. If one wanted to be an optimist, is it possible to say that the Legionaries are moving down a path that Opus Dei and others have travelled before, and that they too will change?

I hope so, because it does a lot of good. It's 96 percent good work, and 4 percent that's almost a sect. It's just 4 percent ? but if it's a question of immoral or even illegal operations, even if it's just 1 percent, you've got to address it.

One could say that the Legionaries face a special challenge, because nobody accused the founder of Opus Dei or other groups of sexual abuse.

But even without that, it's still a problem. Had those accusations never arisen, what's going on still has to be dealt with. It's still that 4 percent. On the other hand, you're right that this complicates it tremendously, the fact that there are accusations which have not been acknowledged.

I know all this is unpleasant for them. My letter will draw unfortunate attention to the seamier sides of their organization. I'm trying to say that I think there will be cooperation. If I didn't think that there are real, solid grounds for trusting their commitment to this agreement, I would not have gone through it.

I'll be completely honest. Two or three months ago, I told our Priests' Council, "We've gone to the end. We can't go any further, and we'll have to ask them to leave the archdiocese." There was spontaneous applause.

Your priests have been supportive?

Yes, by all means.

Do some of them wish you would go further and faster?

Yes. In my last meeting with them, I had to pull back. I told them that the Holy See has asked that we wait until I have a meeting with the Superior General. They were understanding of that, but you know, the bishop still has a right in his own diocese to do certain things. I want to give it every opportunity.

Just to be clear, you had actually reached a decision to ask them to leave?

We were tantamount to doing that.

Then it was an intervention from the Holy See that asked you to meet first with Fr. Corcuera, and your letter came out of that process?

That's right, yes.

When did the Holy See step in?

I got a call 20 minutes before my meeting with Fr. Raymond [Cosgrave] two months ago. Then I got a letter from another cardinal, and a phone call from a third cardinal the day before I met with Fr. Alvaro.

The tenor of all three was to give Fr. Corcuera a chance?

Yes. One of them said, you have the authority to take many actions here. We just ask you not to take any action until he has a chance to speak with you.

Are there any other groups in the archdiocese with which you have similar difficulties?

No.

So this isn't the first of other letters to other groups?

No, I certainly hope not. It isn't pleasant. I've met with a number of disenchanted members of the Legionaries of Christ, who have first-hand experience. I also met, however, with ten active members of Regnum Christi. I was deeply impressed. I had known Legionaries and Regnum Christi members in passing, but this meeting was my first formal get-together. It lasted almost two hours, and I could see the anxiety, the tension, they have. They want to be faithful to the church and to the bishop, but they are also so deeply grateful and involved in the good works they see Regnum Christi doing.

That was after my first meeting with the priests, when I said that we're going to have to take the strong action of closing them out of the archdiocese. I saw the good that was being done, but I was already on the record. People were saying, "You're going to back down, you're going to back down." I don't feel I

did. By the way, the reaction on both sides so far has been pretty good, meaning active Regnum Christi members and former Regnum Christi people. The ex-members are saying, "Do you really think they're going to discontinue [these practices]?" Some of them are skeptical that's going to happen.

Knowing Fr. Alvaro, however, and because they know my resolve, I have good reason to believe that they'll follow through. If they don't, there's no hiding it. Sooner or later, it's going to come out.

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