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Legionaires 'relieved' by Vatican visitation

by John L. Allen Jr.



Legionaires founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado (CNS photo)

Although news of a Vatican inquest rarely brings comfort to its target, several sources close to the Legionaries of Christ, both in the United States and in Rome, say the dominant reaction within the embattled religious order to the announcement of a Vatican-ordered apostolic visitation has been relief.

"Collectively, we're thrilled this is happening," one Legionary priest told NCR. "Our view is, the sooner the better."

Facing mounting calls for either a major overhaul of the order or its outright suppression, these sources said, at least some Legionaries have come to see an independent Vatican investigation as the lone "exit strategy" from their recent woes, potentially allowing the order to move forward despite being forced to admit serious misconduct by its founder, and despite a long history of denying that misconduct.

Vatican orders visitation of Legionaires of Christ

Like others contacted for this article, the priest spoke on background "in part, he said, because the

Vatican has asked the Legionaries to withhold public comment while the investigation is gearing up.

Announced on March 29, the investigation comes in the wake of a recent acknowledgment by the Legionaries of "grave facts" in the life of their founder, Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, including that Maciel had fathered a daughter out of wedlock. Maciel, who died in 2008, had previously been charged with sexual abuse by former members of the order. Those charges were the subject of a Vatican inquiry in 2006, which ended with an order for Maciel to withdraw from public ministry and to live a life of "prayer and penance."

In a letter to members of the Legion informing them of the investigation, Fr. Alvaro Corcuera, Maciel's successor, effectively conceded Maciel's culpability. "We are deeply saddened and sorry," Corcuera wrote, "and we sincerely ask for forgiveness from God and from those who have been hurt through this."

Following those admissions, several prominent Catholics, including noted American commentator George Weigel, have demanded an aggressive Vatican review, with some suggesting that the proper remedy may be to shut the order down. Senior prelates have struck a similar note; Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore, for example, recently demanded "full disclosure of [Maciel's] activities and those who are complicit in them, or knew of them, and of those who are still refusing to offer disclosure."

In the context, sources close to the Legionaries said, many members look upon the Vatican investigation as a way to affirm the order's on-going viability, regardless of what further details it might uncover about Maciel's conduct — or who in the order may have known about it and kept it secret.

"However painful this may be, it's better than the alternative," one Legionary said.

Legionary sources pointed to what they saw as the encouraging tone of a March 10 letter from Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, announcing the visitation. In it, Bertone wrote that the order's mission is of "fundamental importance," stating that "many people benefit from the works of education and apostolate which the Legionaries of Christ carry out in various parts of the world."

Sources in Rome told NCR that if abolishing the Legion was in the cards, the Vatican could have repeated the step taken in the late 1950s, when Maciel and the Legion were first investigated by Rome. At that time, Maciel was deposed pending the outcome of the review, although he was later reinstated. In this case, Corcuera has not been removed as the order's superior, and Bertone's letter expressed "esteem" for Corcuera.

Though the Vatican has not yet outlined the logistics of the visitation, sources said that the officials who will conduct the review, formally referred to as "visitors," should be appointed shortly. Expectations are that a minimum of three-five visitors will be appointed, with at least one responsible for Italy and the rest of Europe, one for North America, and one for Mexico and Latin America. The visitation itself is likely to take several months; in the United States alone, the Legionaries of Christ operate multiple houses of formation, minor seminaries, centers for consecrated women, and other facilities.

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In one unusual wrinkle, sources said that the Vatican office which will supervise the review is likely to be the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, rather than the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which normally has jurisdiction over religious communities.

In part, sources say, that's because it was the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which carried out the investigation of Maciel that ended in 2006, so its officials are in a better position to brief the visitors and to set out the parameters of the investigation.

In part, however, it may also be to avoid perceptions of bias. The top official of the Congregation for Religious, Slovenian Cardinal Franc Rodé, has been publicly supportive of the Legionaries in the past, and a member of the Legionaries of Christ, Fr. Clemens Gutberlet, works on Rodé's staff. The Legion does not currently have anyone serving in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

If the visitation of the Legionaries follows the pattern of past Vatican-supervised investigations, the visitors will file confidential reports with Rome, and the Vatican will eventually prepare a set of conclusions ? phrased either as ?recommendations? or ?mandates? ? for the order's leadership.

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