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Abolition of Legionaries should be 'on the table'

by John L. Allen Jr.



Archbishop Edwin O'Brien and Cardinal William H. Keeler at an April 2 prayer service. (CNS)

Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore has emerged as one of the most outspoken critics of the Legionaries of Christ among the American bishops. In an interview with NCR in June 2008, O'Brien voiced frustration about what he saw as a lack of transparency and said he had decided to ask the Legionaries and their lay arm, Regnum Christi, to withdraw from his archdiocese, but stayed his hand at the request of the Vatican. He asked the Legionaries to provide a full accounting of all their activities in the archdiocese.

In February, O'Brien told his archdiocesan newspaper that in the wake of an admission by the Legionaries that their founder, Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, had engaged in grave misconduct, including fathering a child out of wedlock, the order must offer "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," adding that the finances of the order should also be opened to "objective scrutiny." Those comments came after O'Brien met in Rome with Maciel's successor as the superior of the Legionaries, Fr. Alvaro Corcuera.

O'Brien, who is generally considered a theological conservative, said in February that his objection to the Legionaries has nothing to do with their reputation for doctrinal orthodoxy and loyalty to the papacy.

Instead, he said, the issue is "respect for human dignity for each of its members."

On March 29, the Legionaries revealed that the Vatican has decided to conduct an apostolic visitation of the embattled order. In his first interview since that announcement, O'Brien outlined his perspective on the investigation. He brings personal experience to the subject, since O'Brien was tapped by the Vatican to coordinate a wide-ranging visitation of American seminaries and religious houses of formation in 2005 and 2006.

O'Brien spoke to NCR by phone April 3.

Are you encouraged by the Vatican's decision to launch an apostolic visitation?

I certainly am. I think it settles a lot of people's concerns that nothing was going to be done. It remains to be seen how this visitation will shape up, how deep they will go into the whole matter of the Legionaries and Regnum Christi. I would think that this is a one-shot thing, that we'll have one swing at this, and I hope that it answers the questions and responds to the doubts that so many people have raised.

You've run an Apostolic Visitation. What does it take to get it right?

First of all, it takes some trust on the part of the institution that's being reviewed. That means cooperation, full cooperation, including opening all the books and providing all the background that's required to get a full picture.

Are you confident the Legionaries are ready to cooperate?

I hope so. I'll put it that way: I really do hope so. It depends on so many individuals being open, because it just takes a few to try to block it and to mislead. I hope that the Legionaries will realize that in the long run, this is going to help them.

You're recently had talks in Rome with Fr. Alvaro Corcuera, the superior of the Legionaries. Are you confident he's ready to cooperate?

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I can't say. I'm quite sure he would want to see this thing cleared up, and I hope he'll realize that the best way is to encourage everyone to cooperate.

What are the issues that the visitation should consider?

In the first place, they have to look at Maciel himself. What are the facts, who knew them, when did they know them, and why did it take so long for them to become public? They should look at the financial dimension. They also need to examine who the victims are, and what's being done to meet the needs of those victims.

Then, they need to look at the structure that Maciel created. There was a good deal of secrecy in his own life, and there's secrecy in the structures he created. It would be helpful to know why there is such secrecy. For example, why is there such an effort with their seminarians to limit their exposure to the real world out there? What are their recruiting strategies for vocations to the priesthood? How above board are they? What are the numbers involved, how many priests have been ordained and how many are still active in the priesthood with the Legionaries?

The Legionaries put out numbers. Are you suggesting they may be skewed?

I'm told that the numbers are hard to come by. We might have ordination numbers for this year and a total of those ordained, but I hear there's a large drop-out rate ? that's the scuttlebutt, anyway. If so, it would help them to reveal that and to ask questions as to why. Does that reflect something in their formation? I don't know, but we should be asking the question.

What's the profile of the right kind of person to conduct this visitation?

It has to be clear that they're working directly for the Holy Father. They have to be convinced of that, and so do the members of the Legion. They should also have some status, so I think it would be helpful if bishops were involved. They should be as objective as possible. They should also have some experience with religious life, with the vows, formation, canonical structures and spirituality of religious life.

Do you believe that abolition of the Legionaries should be on the table?

I think everything should be on the table. Of course, the ultimate hope is that what is good [in the Legion] can be preserved, so that it grows into a stronger movement. That's what everyone would like to see. I have said before, however, that there may be something endemic in the whole thing that will not allow that to happen.

In your view, the visitators should not be afraid to recommend drastic steps?

Absolutely not. This is a solemn obligation they have. It's very serious. Souls are at stake, lives are at stake. I'm sure the Holy Father will let them know that every aspect should be investigated, including the Legion's accomplishments, areas that need to be improved, as well as areas that have to be excised.

You've been very public in your criticisms of the order. Why have you chosen to speak out?

I saw a lot of the Legion when I was in Rome, and I heard a lot about them back here in the States. When I came to Baltimore, I learned that [Cardinal William Keeler] had been dealing with them on a local basis for three or four years, asking for greater transparency, and basically got nowhere. Our priests were frustrated. When I told them that I would demand accountability and share the results with the priests' council, it got a very positive reception.

When word got out of what I was doing, I was surprised by the response. I've received some harshly negative reactions, but I've also had letters from all over the country saying 'Thank you, here's my story.' I got one just last week, from somebody who had been in the organization for seven years and left last week, saying how guilty they felt and that they're having nightmares. It seems to have such a hold on people, and we need to find out why. I don't know of any other organization that has created this atmosphere of suspicion. For their good, and for the good of the church, the full picture should be laid out.

I had no idea when this started that it would draw such a reception. I don't regret it, but it certainly wasn't planned. In the long run, I believe it will be helpful.

Apart from the details about Maciel, are their broader lessons for the church in what's happened with the Legionaries?

I think it begins with Maciel, with the cult of personality around him, the secrecy. The saints don't need that. We have many saints who are respected and looked up to in ways similar to how so many looked up to Maciel, but the saints don't have that fence around them, that mysterious following.

We can learn from this. So many have been devastated and misled, and it will be good to see how it all came about. It's a lesson about holiness in the church. There's also something to learn about transparency. Of course, there are some areas where the church has to conduct itself in the internal forum, to protect people's rights and consciences, but I do think that at the core of the Legionaries there's been an unnecessary and unhealthy secrecy.

Do you sense that a growing number of Legionaries and Regnum Christ members agree with you?

I think so. I've spoken to a couple of Legionary priests who say they're on the fence right now, wanting to see this thing clarified. They're good priests, they've gotten a lot out of the movement, but now so much of what nourished them seems to be less ideal than they thought it was.

It will be tough for them. I don't know of any religious orders founded by somebody like Maciel, or if they were, they didn't last very long. The Legion has managed to dig itself in pretty deep, and to spread broadly. I don't think it necessarily has to fold, because it has some elements that have contributed to people's holiness. If we can preserve that, we'll be better for it.

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