

Legionaries' letter details reforms order has made

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Sep. 8, 2009



Pope Benedict XVI meets with Father Alvaro Corcuera, director general of the Legionaries of Christ and its lay association, Regnum Christi, at the Vatican in this June 16, 2006, file photo.

The Legionaries of Christ have initiated a number of reforms since publicly acknowledging Feb. 4 that the order's founder, Mexican Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, fathered a child, two U.S. Legionaries priests said in a letter to members of the order's lay association, Regnum Christi.

The reforms include the training of Legionaries on best practices when dealing with minors to protect children from sex abuse; reconfiguring business and management practices; and altering the depiction of Father Maciel in the order's communications, including Web sites and publications, Father Scott Reilly, director of the order's Atlanta territory, and Father Julio Marti, director of the New York territory, wrote Sept. 1.

In February, Legionaries' officials said they had only recently learned their late founder had fathered a child. In the past, Father Maciel had been accused of sexually abusing young seminarians in the order.

Father Maciel died Jan. 30, 2008, at the age of 87. In May 2006 the Vatican decided after its own investigation against conducting a canonical trial, but rather ordered the then-frail Father Maciel to withdraw to a life of prayer and penance.

The two priests acknowledged that more recent allegations of "other relationships and other children" have been made, but they declined to comment specifically about them.

"Given the partial nature of the information available and the impossibility to evaluate immediately and in a definitive manner these complex allegations, the Legion of Christ cannot, at this time, make a statement regarding them," the priests wrote.

While mentioning the Vatican-ordered apostolic visitation the order is undergoing, the letter offered few details of the process, which began July 15. The priests said Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver will be visiting Legionaries' seminaries and religious houses in the U.S., but offered no timeline for the visits or a date when his report will be forwarded to the Vatican.

Tracy Murphy, associate director of communications for the Archdiocese of Denver, said Sept. 4 details of the visitation are being kept confidential.

Jim Fair, U.S. spokesman for the order, told Catholic News Service Sept. 4 the letter was sent to Regnum Christi members to provide an update on what the order was doing since it became public that Father Maciel had fathered a child. He said the letter was sent to offer "reassurance to our members because it obviously has been a real challenging time."

The six-page letter, posted on the order's Web site at www.legionariesofchrist.org, was sent after a visit to the U.S. by Legionaries Father Alvaro Corcuera, director general of the order and of Regnum Christi, who presided over the Aug. 29 profession of vows of a group of novices and men religious in Cheshire, Conn.

Father Marti and Father Reilly offered an apology to "all those who have been harmed or scandalized by (Father Maciel's) actions."

"To all we extend a special apology on behalf of the legion and our general director, Father Alvaro Corcuera, who has, in fact, begun to reach out personally and in private to those he knows may have suffered most, offering his heartfelt apology and consolation," the U.S. priests wrote.

They did not address specific allegations against Father Maciel.

Recognizing that "this unexpected turn of events has been traumatic," the priests also acknowledged that many with Legionaries of Christ connections have experienced "shock, anger, disbelief, denial and fear."

"These emotions, the vast tangle of information, supposition, speculation and opinion, the different cultural sensitivities and the Christian duty not to publicize the sins of others, have made it difficult to publish the sort of direct statement that many expected of us," the priests said.

"What we do learn, we will address, respecting the privacy of those who request it of us," they added.

The priests' letter said that the order has begun working with Praesidium Inc., an Arlington, Texas-based risk-management firm which assists religious organizations, schools, recreation programs and nursing homes in preventing sexual and physical abuse.

The company offers online and on-site training "to set standards that ensure safety," according to its Web site. It also offers an accreditation program that certifies an organization as meeting more than two-dozen standards related to appropriate behavior and safeguards against abuse.

The letter also said the order has put in place in recent years new business practices with the help of lay professionals.

In updating its Web sites and other communications, the Legionaries have begun an "adjustment" in the "way we refer to Father Maciel in the Legion and in Regnum Christi," the letter continued.

"While we cannot deny that Father Maciel was our founder and did much good, neither can we deny the reality of what has recently come to light and his grave human failings," the letter said. "We have taken progressive steps to make sure that there is no inappropriate reference to Father Maciel."

The letter said pictures of the Mexican priest have been removed from various Legionaries' centers and a review of the order's publications and brochures is under way.

Father Reilly and Father Marti said they expect further steps will be taken across the order in the future.

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Editor's Note: The full text of the letter from Father Reilly and Father Marti is available online at www.legionariesofchrist.org/eng/articulos/articulo2.phtml?se=242&ca=905&te=586&id=27251&csearch=905.

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