

Legion of Christ acknowledge founder abused seminarians

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Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado (CNS)

ROME -- Top officials of the Legionaries of Christ acknowledged that the order's founder, the late Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, sexually abused young seminarians, and they asked forgiveness for failing to listen to his accusers.

A statement released March 26 by the Legionaries and its lay branch, Regnum Christi, said that any members of the order who were guilty of cooperation in Father Maciel's crimes would be held accountable.

The March 26 statement said the Legionaries were looking to the future with the hope of continuing to serve the church, but with a greater emphasis on reconciling with those who suffered from Father Maciel's actions and greater cooperation with local pastors and other church officials.

A note from NCR's editors

The late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado personified some of the ugliest realities of the Catholic church's clergy sex abuse crisis. Maciel, a long-time favorite of Pope John Paul II, who once declared him "an efficacious guide to youth," was actually a sexual predator who abused young seminarians and who also had a secret life as a father of several children by at least two women.

The acknowledgment and apology by current Legion officials puts an end to the long denial of the order that Maciel had done anything wrong.

On Monday NCR will post the first of two parts of a story by Jason Berry on how Maciel insinuated himself into influence in Vatican circles with lavish cash gifts and how he retained control over the order during more than half a century. Berry, who wrote the first national story on the sex abuse scandal in the United States in 1985, also broke the earliest stories on the Legion and accusations against its founder, Maciel.

The future of the order rests in the hands of Pope Benedict XVI, who ordered an apostolic visitation of the Legionaries last year. The visitation team's report was expected to be handed in to the Vatican at the end of April.

After investigating allegations that Maciel had sexually abused young seminarians, in May 2006 the Vatican ordered him to stop practicing his ministry in public and to live a life of prayer and penitence. At the time, Legion officials defended Maciel's declaration of innocence and compared him to Christ for his suffering.

The latest statement says the 2006 Vatican investigation reached "sufficient moral certainty to impose serious canonical sanctions related to the accusations made against Maciel, which included the sexual abuse of minor seminarians."

"Therefore, though it causes us consternation, we have to say that these acts did take place," it said.

The statement asked forgiveness from "those whom we did not believe or were incapable of giving a hearing to, since at the time we could not imagine that such behavior took place."

"If it turns out that anyone culpably cooperated in his misdeeds, we will act according to the principles of Christian justice and charity, holding these people responsible for their actions," it said.

In early 2009, the Legionaries said it had learned that Maciel had fathered a daughter. The latest statement said Maciel had had a longstanding relationship with the child's mother, and that two other people have since come forward, claiming to be the offspring of Maciel and a different woman.

"We find reprehensible these and all the actions in the life of Father Maciel that were contrary to his Christian, religious, and priestly duties. We declare that they are not what we strive to live in the Legion of Christ and in the Regnum Christi movement," it said.

"Once again, we express our sorrow and grief to each and every person damaged by our founder's actions," the statement said. It offered the order's "pastoral and spiritual help" to those who were injured by Maciel's actions.

Maciel, who died in January 2008 at age 87, founded the Legionaries of Christ in 1951 and was its superior until 2005.

The Legionaries' statement said that God, "for his own mysterious reasons," had chosen Father Maciel to found the order and its lay association, and "we thank God for the good he did."

"At the same time, we accept and regret that, given the gravity of his faults, we cannot take his person as a model of Christian or priestly life," it said.

The statement said the Legionaries would follow the instructions given by Pope Benedict in light of the Vatican investigation, which was conducted in the order's institutions around the world. Many at the Vatican expect a major reorganization of the Legionaries, perhaps with direct supervision by the Vatican.

As it looks to the future, the statement said, the Legionaries resolved to do several things, including:

- Reach out to those who have suffered.
- Tell the truth about the order's history.
- Protect minors in all its institutions.
- Cooperate better with bishops and church institutions.
- Continue oversight and demand accountability in the order.
- Redouble its efforts to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible.

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