

Money paved way for Maciel's influence in the Vatican

Jason Berry | Apr. 6, 2010
Legion of Christ investigation



Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado greets Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square in this 2000 file photo. (CNS)

First of Two Parts

In his time, the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado was the greatest fundraiser of the modern Roman Catholic church. He was also a magnetic figure in recruiting young men to religious life in an era when vocations were plummeting. Behind that exalted façade, however, Maciel was a notorious pedophile, and a man who fathered several children by different women. His life was arguably the darkest chapter in the clergy abuse crisis that continues to plague the church.

The saga of the disgraced founder of the Legion of Christ, a secretive, cult-like religious order now under Vatican investigation, opens into a deeper story of how one man's lies and betrayal dazzled key figures in the Roman curia and how Maciel's money and success helped him find protection and influence. For years, the heads of Vatican congregations and the pope himself ignored persistent warnings that something was rotten in the community where Legionaries called their leader *Nuestro Padre*, "Our Father," and considered him a living saint.

The charismatic Mexican, who founded the Legion of Christ in 1941, sent streams of money to Roman curia officials with a calculated end, according to many sources interviewed by *NCR*: Maciel was buying support for his group and defense for himself, should his astounding secret life become known.

This much is well established from previous reporting: Maciel was a morphine addict who sexually abused at least 20 Legion seminarians from the 1940s to the '60s. Bishop John McGann of Rockville Centre, N.Y., sent a letter by a former Legion priest with detailed allegations to the Vatican in 1976, 1978 and 1989 through official channels. Nothing happened. Maciel began fathering children in the early 1980s -- three of them by two Mexican women, with reports of a third family with three children in Switzerland, according to *El Mundo* in Madrid, Spain. Concealing his web of relations, Maciel raised a fortune from wealthy backers, and ingratiated himself with church officials in Rome.

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"What I can say about Fr. Maciel is that he was a consummate con artist," Fr. Stephen Fichter, a sociologist and former Legion official, told *NCR*. "He would use any means to achieve his end, even if that meant lying to the pope, or any of the cardinals in Rome."

When Maciel died on Jan. 30, 2008, the Legion leadership announced that the 87-year-old founder had gone to heaven. While God alone knows Maciel's fate, the Legion's statement stands in hindsight as one final act of deception by a figure whose legacy is still wreaking havoc from the grave. In February 2009, the Legionaries revealed that Maciel had a daughter. Late last month, the Legionaries issued a vaguely worded statement of regret to unnamed victims of Maciel -- four years after Pope Benedict XVI banished him from active ministry to "a life of prayer and repentance" for abusing seminarians.

Maciel left a trail of wreckage among his followers. Moreover, in a gilded irony for Benedict -- who prosecuted him despite pressure from Maciel's chief supporter, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican secretary of state from 1990 to 2006 -- Maciel left an ecclesiastical empire with which the church must now contend. The Italian newsweekly *L'espresso* estimates the Legion's assets at 25 billion euros, with a \$650 million annual budget, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. The order numbered 700 priests and 1,300 seminarians in 2008. On March 15 of this year, five bishops, called visitators, from as many countries, delivered their reports to the pope after a seven-month investigation. A final report is expected by the end of April.

Not in centuries has a scandal in the church had such complexity as this one. A huge financial operation is in the hands of a religious order many critics have likened to a cult, a group whose leadership is suspected of hiding its superior's corrupt life. As the Vatican grapples with the Legion -- and thorny legal questions as to whether the Holy See can intervene in the Legion's far-flung financial operations -- three of Maciel's sons and their mother in Mexico demand compensation, claiming they were cut off by the Legion when Maciel died.

Besides the complex questions of whether to dismantle or "reform" the Legion, Benedict is under pressure from a resurgent sex abuse scandal in Ireland, and cases from years back in Germany, Wisconsin and Arizona, in which he reportedly failed to discipline abusive priests.

The Legion scandal stands out for another reason: The Maciel case and the trail of money he reportedly gave cardinals raises profound ethical questions about how money circulates in the Vatican.

In an *NCR* investigation that began last July, encompassing dozens of interviews in Rome, Mexico City and several U.S. cities, what emerges is the saga of a man who ingratiated himself with Vatican officials, including some of those in charge of offices that should have investigated him, as he dispensed thousands of dollars in cash and largesse.

Maciel built his base by cultivating wealthy patrons, particularly widows, starting in his native Mexico in the 1940s. Even as he was trailed by pedophilia accusations, Maciel attracted large numbers of seminarians in an era of dwindling vocations. In 1994 Pope John Paul II heralded him as "an efficacious guide to youth." John Paul continued praising Maciel after a 1997 *Hartford Courant* investigation by Gerald Renner and this writer exposed Maciel's drug habits and abuse of seminarians. In 1998, eight ex-Legionaries filed a canon law case to prosecute him in then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's tribunal. For the next six years, Maciel had the staunch support of three pivotal figures: Sodano; Cardinal Eduardo Martínez Somalo, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life; and Msgr. Stanislaw Dziwisz, the Polish secretary of John Paul. During those years, Sodano pressured Ratzinger not to prosecute Maciel, as *NCR* previously reported. Ratzinger told a Mexican bishop that the Maciel case was a "delicate" matter and questioned whether it would be "prudent" to prosecute at that time.

In 2004, John Paul -- ignoring the canon law charges against Maciel -- honored him in a Vatican ceremony in which he entrusted the Legion with the administration of Jerusalem's Notre Dame Center, an education and conference facility. The following week, Ratzinger took it on himself to authorize an investigation of Maciel.

John Paul's support gave Maciel credibility as he moved with seamless ease among the ultra-wealthy. At a 2004 fundraiser in New York, a video cameraman filmed him running his fingers down the tuxedo lapel of the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, a major Legion supporter. Besides donations, Legion schools in Mexico with high tuitions and low salaries subsidized the operations in Rome, say men familiar with the order's finances.

As questions swirl about how Maciel misled so many people, his ability to attract the powerful and influential is beyond dispute. Legion supporters ranged from Steve McEveety, producer of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" (Legion priests advised on the film), to Thomas Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza and Ave Maria University in Florida. Others who supported the Legion include former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, who spoke at Legion conferences; Spanish opera singer Placido Domingo, who performed at a fundraiser; and the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, who wrote that he believed with "moral certainty" that the charges against Maciel were "false and malicious."

Harvard Law Professor and former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican Mary Ann Glendon taught at Regina Apostolorum Athenaeum, the Legion's university in Rome, and advised in the planning that led to the order's first university in America, University of Sacramento, Calif. In a 2002 letter for the Legion Web site she scoffed at the allegations against him and praised Maciel's "radiant holiness" and "the success of Regnum Christi [the order's lay wing] and the Legionaries of Christ in advancing the New Evangelization."

Author and conservative activist George Weigel also endorsed the Legion in 2002 on its Web site: "If Fr. Maciel and his charisma as a founder are to be judged by the fruits of this work, those fruits are most impressive indeed." Weigel has since called on the Vatican to investigate the order.

CNN commentator William Bennett spoke at Legion gatherings and also said: "I am fortunate enough to know and trust the priests of the Legionaries of Christ. ... The flourishing of the Legionaries is a cause for hope in a time of much darkness." Former CNN religion correspondent Delia Gallagher spoke at a Legion fundraiser, and William Donohue, president of the New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, defended Maciel in a letter to the *Hartford Courant*, after a 1997 article that exposed Maciel's history of pedophilia.

Two Legion priests are TV news celebrities: Jonathan Morris on FOX, and Tom Williams, a theology professor at the Legion university in Rome, for NBC during Katie Couric's coverage of the 2005 conclave and again with Couric at CBS.

Consequences came late

In April 2005, Ratzinger was elected pope. In 2006, as Benedict, he banished Maciel from ministry to a "life of prayer and penitence." Maciel left Rome in disgrace, though the Legionaries mounted a defense of his innocence.

In the last week of January 2008, Maciel's 21-year-old daughter and her mother reportedly traveled from Spain to the Miami hospital where he lay dying. That pleased him, while jarring several Legionaries; but the women did not go on to Mexico for the funeral. His three sons and their mother in Mexico avoided the funeral too. His chosen Legion successors gathered in his remote hometown, Cotija de la Paz, for burial at a family crypt, far from his previously designated tomb at Rome's Our Lady of Guadalupe Basilica, which he built in the 1950s.

Besides Fichter, who has a parish in New Jersey, two priests still serving the church who left the Legion several years ago drew on detailed knowledge of Maciel's financial practices in lengthy interviews, answering questions in continuing telephone calls and e-mails. These priests -- and two priests in Rome who are members of the Legion -- spoke on background, fearing repercussions to their careers were they to be identified.

This story also relies on international press accounts, works by Spanish and Mexican researchers, and attorneys who are piecing together information on Maciel's financial strategy and his families.

NCR made repeated efforts to seek comment from the three cardinals who allegedly received substantial payments under Maciel's auspices, by speaking with Vatican spokesman Fr. Federico Lombardi on the telephone and via follow-up e-mails. Besides calls to the residences of the two cardinals in Rome, the paper made an extensive effort to contact now-Cardinal Dziwisz, in Krakow, Poland. Iowana Hoffman, a Polish journalist in New York, translated a letter with questions for the cardinal, faxed it to Dziwisz's press secretary, but was told that the cardinal "does not have time for an interview."

Sodano, the former secretary of state and now dean of the College of Cardinals, and Martínez Somalo, former papal chamberlain, did not respond to messages left with Lombardi. A receptionist who answered Sodano's residential number said to call the Vatican. The woman answering Martínez Somalo's phone, when asked in Spanish if he would speak with a journalist, said emphatically, "*No entrevista!*" -- "No interview."

Had Sodano, Martínez Somalo and Dziwisz responded, the cardinals might have answered one question that hovers over this baroque financial drama: How do Vatican officials decide what to report, and to whom, if they are given large sums of money? The Vatican has no constitution or statutes that would make such transactions illegal. But those familiar with the strategy say it was Maciel's goal to insulate himself from the Vatican's archaic system of secret tribunals by making friends with men in power.

For most of his life, it worked.

Making friends in the right places

The Vatican office with the greatest potential to derail Maciel's career before 2001 -- the year that Ratzinger persuaded John Paul to consolidate authority of abuse investigations in his office ? was the Congregation for Religious, which oversaw religious orders such as the Dominicans, Franciscans and Legionaries, among many others.

According to two former Legionaries who spent years in Rome, Maciel paid for the renovation of the residence in Rome for the Argentine cardinal who was prefect of religious from 1976 to 1983, the late Eduardo Francisco Pironio. "That's a pretty big resource," explains one priest, who said the Legion's work on the residence was expensive, and widely known at upper levels of the order. "Pironio got his arm twisted to sign the Legion constitution."

The Legion constitution included the highly controversial Private Vows, by which each Legionary swore never to speak ill of Maciel, or the superiors, and to report to them anyone who uttered criticism. The vows basically rewarded spying as an expression of faith, and cemented the Legionaries' lockstep obedience to the founder. The vows were Maciel's way of deflecting scrutiny as a pedophile. But cardinals on the consultants' board at Congregation for Religious balked on granting approval.

"Therefore, Maciel went to the pope through Msgr. Dziwisz," said the priest. "Two weeks later Pironio signed it."

Dziwisz was John Paul's closest confidante, a Pole who had a bedroom in the private quarters of the Apostolic Palace. Maciel spent years cultivating Dziwisz's support. Under Maciel, the Legion steered streams of money to Dziwisz in his function as gatekeeper for the pope's private Masses in the Apostolic Palace. Attending Mass in the small chapel was a rare privilege for the occasional head of state, like British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his family. "Mass would start at 7 a.m., and there was always someone in attendance: laypeople, or priests, or groups of bishops," Dziwisz wrote in a 2008 memoir, *A Life With Karol: My Forty-Year Friendship With the Man Who Became Pope*.

"When the guests came in (there were never more than 50)," Dziwisz wrote, "they often found the pope kneeling in prayer with his eyes closed, in a state of total abandonment, almost of ecstasy, completely unaware of who was entering the chapel. ... For the laypeople, it was a great spiritual experience. The Holy Father attached extreme importance to the presence of the lay faithful."

One of the ex-Legionaries in Rome told *NCR* that a Mexican family in 1997 gave Dziwisz \$50,000 upon attending Mass. "We arranged things like that," he said of his role as go-between. Did John Paul know about the funds? Only Dziwisz would know. Given the pope's ascetic lifestyle and accounts of his charitable giving, the funds could have gone to a deserving cause. Dziwisz's book says nothing of donations and contains no mention of Maciel or the Legion. The priest who arranged for the Mexican family to attend Mass worried, in hindsight, about the frequency with which Legionaries facilitated funds to Dziwisz.

"This happened all the time with Dziwisz," said a second ex-Legionary, who was informed of the transactions.

Fr. Alvaro Corcuera, who would succeed Maciel as director general in 2004, and one or two other Legionaries "would go up to see Dziwisz on the third floor. They were welcomed. They were known within the household."

Struggling to give context to the donations, this cleric continued: "You're saying these laypeople are good and fervent, it's good for them to meet the pope. The expression is *opera carita* -- 'We're making an offering for your works of charity.' That's the way it's done. In fact you don't know where the money's going." He paused. "It's an elegant way of giving a bribe."

Recalling those events, he spoke of what made him leave the Legion. "I woke up and asked: Am I giving my life to serve God, or one man who had his problems? It was not worth consecrating myself to Maciel."

What's a bribe?

In terms of legal reality, does "an elegant way of giving a bribe" add up to bribery? The money from Maciel was given to heads of congregations in the early 1990s and the newspaper exposure of Maciel did not occur until 1997, and the canon law case in 1998.

Further, such exchanges are not considered bribes in the view of Nicholas Cafardi, a prominent canon lawyer and the dean emeritus of Duquesne University Law School in Pittsburgh. Cafardi, who has done work as a legal consultant for many bishops, responded to a general question about large donations to priests or church officials in the Vatican.

Under church law (canon 1302), a large financial gift to an official in Rome "would qualify as a pious cause," explains Cafardi. He spoke in broad terms, saying that such funds should be reported to the cardinal-vicar for Rome. An expensive gift, like a car, need not be reported.

"That's how I read the law. I know of no exceptions. Cardinals do have to report gifts for pious causes. If funds are given for the official's personal charity, that is not a pious cause and need not be reported."

Because the cardinals did not respond to interview requests, *NCR* has been unable to determine whether they reported to Vatican officials the money they allegedly received from the Legion.

"Maciel wanted to buy power," said the priest who facilitated the Mexican family's *opera carita* to Dziwisz. He did not use the word bribery, but in explaining why he left the Legion, morality was at issue. "It got to a breaking point for me [over] a culture of lying [within the order]. The superiors know they're lying and they know that you know," he said. "They lie about money, where it comes from, where it goes, how it's given."

When Martínez Somalo, a Spaniard, became head of the congregation overseeing religious in 1994, Maciel dispatched this priest to Martínez Somalo's home. The young priest carried an envelope thick with cash. "I didn't bat an eye," he recalled. "I went up to his apartment, handed him the envelope, said goodbye. ... It was a way of making friends, insuring certain help if it were needed, oiling the cogs."

Martínez Somalo did not respond to *NCR* interview requests.



Glenn Favreau, a Legionary in Rome from 1990 to 1997, and today an attorney in Washington, D.C., recalled: "Martínez Somalo was talked about a lot in the Legion, always in the context of 'our superior' because he was our friend. *Un amigo de Legion*." Favreau, who knew nothing of the donation to Martínez Somalo, continued: "There were cardinals who weren't *amigos*. They wouldn't call them enemies, but everyone knew who they were. Pio Laghi did not like the Legion." Cardinal Laghi, former papal nuncio to the United States, was then prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

Martínez Somalo's office took a new name: Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. But the job description stayed the same. From 1994 to 2004, the Spanish cardinal's duties included investigating any complaints about religious orders or their leaders.

In the files of that congregation, according to several former Legionaries, sat letters that dated back many years, accusing Maciel of abusing seminarians. When the wrenching accounts of nine seminary-victims of Maciel made news in the 1997 *Hartford Courant*, Martínez Somalo did nothing. That was the reaction throughout the Roman curia.

John Paul named Martínez Somalo to the post of *carmelango*, or chamberlain, the official in charge of the conclave when a pope is elected.

Today, the cardinal in charge of the congregation that oversees religious orders is Franc Rodé. He lavished praise on Maciel, the Legion and its lay wing, Regnum Christi, for years.

One cardinal who rebuffed a Legion financial gift was Joseph Ratzinger.

In 1997 he gave a lecture on theology to Legionaries. When a Legionary handed him an envelope, saying it was for his charitable use, Ratzinger refused. "He was tough as nails in a very cordial way," a witness said.

Maciel's modus operandi

Maciel traveled incessantly, drawing funds from Legion centers in Mexico, Rome and the United States. Certain ex-Legionaries with knowledge of the order's finances believe that Maciel constantly drew from Legion coffers to subsidize his families.

For years Maciel had Legion priests dole out envelopes with cash and donate gifts to officials in the curia. In the days leading up to Christmas, Legion seminarians spent hours packaging the baskets with expensive bottles of wine, rare brandy, and cured Spanish hams that alone cost upward of \$1,000 each. Priests involved in the gifts and larger cash exchanges say that in hindsight they view Maciel's strategy as akin to an insurance policy, to protect himself should he be exposed and to position the Legion as an elite presence in the workings of the Vatican.

Fichter, the former Legion member, is today pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Haworth, N.J. He has been a diocesan priest for a decade, and serves in the Newark archdiocese. He coordinated the Legion's administrative office in Rome from February 1998 until October 2000.

"When Fr. Maciel would leave Rome it was my duty to supply him with \$10,000 in cash -- \$5,000 in American dollars, and the other half in the currency of the country to which he was traveling," explained Fichter. "I would be informed by one of his assistants that he was leaving and I would have to prepare the funds for him. I never questioned that he was not using it for good and noble purposes. It was a routine part of my job. He was so totally above reproach that I felt honored to have that role. He did not submit any receipts and I would have not dared to ask him for a receipt."

Fichter was reluctant to be interviewed, expressing concern that his views be fully reflected. "As Legionaries our norms concerning the use of money were very restricted," he began. "If I went on an outing I was given \$20 and if I had a pizza I'd return the \$15 to my superior with a receipt. The sad thing is that we were so naive. We were scrupulously trying to live our vow of poverty and yet never questioned [Maciel's] own fidelity to the same.

"So many of my old classmates are still in the Legion and I feel that they are going through such a hard time

right now. I don't want to have my words misconstrued. ... Maciel hoodwinked everyone. In hindsight I regret that I and so many others were so gullible. Thankfully, for me that was many years ago."

Since earning his doctorate in sociology from Rutgers University, Fichter has worked as a research associate for the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington.

"I am very happy as a pastor and in the research work I am doing for the good of the church. At this stage of my life, having collaborated with the Vatican investigation of the Legion, I pray each day for those who are still Legionaries. If I can help them in any way I will."

Justice delayed

After the ex-Legion victims filed a canonical case in 1998 against Maciel in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Sodano as secretary of state -- essentially, the Vatican prime minister -- pressured Ratzinger, as the congregation's prefect, to halt the proceeding. As *NCR* reported in 2001, José Barba, a college professor in Mexico City and ex-Legionary who filed the 1998 case in Ratzinger's office, learned from the canonist handling the case, Martha Wegan in Rome, of Sodano's role.

"Sodano came over with his entire family, 200 of them, for a big meal when he was named cardinal," recalled Favreau. "And we fed them all. When he became secretary of state there was another celebration. He'd come over for special events, like the groundbreaking with a golden shovel for the House of Higher Studies. And a dinner after that."

The intervention of a high Vatican official in a tribunal case illustrates the fragile nature of the system, and in the Maciel case, how a guilty man escaped punishment for years.

"Cardinal Sodano was the cheerleader for the Legion," said one of the ex-Legionaries. "He'd come give a talk at Christmas and they'd give him \$10,000." Another priest recalled a \$5,000 donation to Sodano.

But in December 2004, with John Paul's health deteriorating by the day, Ratzinger broke with Sodano and ordered a canon lawyer on his staff, Msgr. Charles Scicluna, to investigate. Two years later, as Benedict, he approved the order that Maciel abandon ministry for a "life of penitence and prayer." Maciel had "more than 20 but less than 100 victims," an unnamed Vatican official told *NCR*'s John Allen at the time.

The congregation cited Maciel's age in opting against a full trial.

An influential Vatican official told *NCR* that Sodano insisted on softening the language of the Vatican communiqué -- to praise the Legion and its 60,000-member lay wing, Regnum Christi -- despite the order's nine-year Web site campaign denouncing the seminary victims. The Legion's damage control rolled into a new phase with its statement that compared Maciel to Christ for refusing to defend himself, and accepting his "new cross" with "tranquility of conscience."

Maciel left Rome, the scandal seemingly over. Internally, the Legion insisted to its members and followers that Maciel was innocent.

In 2009, a year after Maciel's death, the Legion disclosed its surprise on discovering that he had a daughter. The news jolted the order and its lay arm, Regnum Christi. Yet in an organization built on a cult of personality, the long praise from John Paul suggested a legacy of virtue in Maciel. Legion officials scrambled to suppress skepticism.

Two Legion priests told *NCR* in July that seminarians in Rome were still being taught about Maciel's virtuous

life. "They are being brainwashed, as if nothing happened," said a Legionary, sitting on a bench near Rome's Tiber River.

Thanks to Sodano's intervention, the order clung to a shaky defense in arguing that the Vatican never specifically said that Maciel abused anyone.

How much Legion officials knew about Maciel's *other* life -- the daughter with her mother in Madrid and three sons with their mother in Mexico -- is a pivotal issue in the Vatican inquiry underway.

How much money did Maciel use to support his families? How much did he siphon off for other purposes behind the guise of a religious charity?

Behind these questions loom others about money in the Vatican. Are envelopes with thousands of dollars in cash given to cardinals when they say Mass, give talks or have dinner in a religious house mere donations? The Legion of Christ raises money as a charity. How does it record such outlays? Does anyone in the Vatican have access to Legion financial records?

When Dziwisz became a bishop in 1998, the Legion covered the costs of his reception at its complex in Rome. "Dziwisz helped the Legion in many ways," said a priest who facilitated payments. "He convinced the pope to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Legion."

In a book on Maciel published in Spain, journalist Alfonso Torres Robles calls an event on Jan. 3, 1991, "one of the most powerful demonstrations of strength by the Legion ... at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, when John Paul II ordained 60 Legionaries into the priesthood, in the presence of 7,000 Regnum Christi members from different countries, 15 cardinals, 52 bishops and many millionaire benefactors."

Maciel had the event filmed and a sequence used in a video the Legion sold until 2006. John Paul was a strategic image in Legion mass mailings and the video shown to potential donors when seminarians accompanied priests to their homes. The Legion no longer circulates the video.

The Legion has a presence in 23 countries, with dozens of elite prep schools, religious formation houses, and several universities.

Maciel's strategy of buying influence unrolled over five decades.

Next: How the empire was built.

[NCR contributor Jason Berry is the author of *Lead Us Not into Temptation* and coauthor, with the late Gerald Renner, of *Vows of Silence*. Berry's film documentary "Vows of Silence" explores the saga of the Vatican and Maciel. A grant from the Investigative Fund from The Nation Institute supported research for this article. www.JasonBerryAuthor.com]

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