

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 7, 2010 at 10:10am

Some back story on Renner, Berry and the Legionaries of Christ

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

I regret very much that Gerald Renner, former religion writer for *The Hartford Courant*, did not live long enough to see himself vindicated.

It was thirteen years ago that he and Jason Berry, an investigative journalist and author in his own right, published a series of well-documented articles on the Legionaries of Christ.

Those articles appeared in *The Hartford Courant* for two reasons. First, it was Renner's professional base. But, second, the U.S. headquarters of the Legionaries is in Cheshire, Conn. So it was also a story with local significance.

For their trouble, Renner and Berry were inundated with official denials and personal attacks. For years the Vatican remained silent about the serious allegations of sexual abuse leveled against the Legion's founder, Fr. Maciel Maciel Degollado.

As Jason Berry's investigative work continued after Renner's death in October 2007, it became clear that Maciel had given high-ranking Vatican officials and Pope John Paul II himself large sums of money, derived from the religious congregation Maciel had founded, to further their "charitable enterprises."

These monetary "gifts" had the effect of insuring the support of certain curial cardinals when charges about Maciel's personal life began to surface. At the same time, Pope John Paul II, who regarded Maciel as a personal favorite, showered him with prestigious papal appointments and public expressions of warm praise for his supposed contributions to the life and mission of the Church.

Renner first learned of the Legionaries while traveling in Rome for *The Courant* in 1989. The then-Archbishop of Hartford John Whealon, no liberal he, pointed out the world headquarters of what he called "that controversial, conservative religious order that has a seminary in Cheshire."

Intrigued, Renner returned to Connecticut and began researching an article about this rapidly growing group, founded in Mexico in 1941 and that had developed an unusually close relationship with the Vatican.

He published his first *Courant* article about the Legionaries in 1996, and teamed up with Jason Berry the following year to produce an in-depth story about Maciel himself. The article documented how, after decades of silence, nine former seminarians from Mexico and Spain accused Maciel of having sexually abused them in European seminaries from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Renner and Berry subsequently co-authored a book, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II*, published in 2004 by the Free Press in New York. According to Rinker Buck's informative obituary in *The Courant*, that book was credited with helping to force the Vatican to remove Maciel from the active priesthood in 2006.

One would like to think that both the investigative series of articles and the book had such an impact, but what was undoubtedly more decisive was the death of John Paul II in April 2005 and the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to succeed him.

It was Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, who re-opened the case and who, unlike his predecessor, severely disciplined Maciel, prohibiting him from any longer publicly exercising his priestly ministry.

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There are some Catholics who are convinced that the most recent action taken by the Vatican, with the explicit approval of Benedict XVI, did not go far enough. In their minds, the Legionaries should have been driven out of existence.

But Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, in his blog for *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post* early last month, has provided a more balanced reaction.

There have been, he wrote, two sets of victims of Maciel's secret, sordid life: those who suffered sexual abuse at his hands, and also those who joined the Legionaries for the highest of motives and who knew nothing of the founder's private life.

Those who should hang their heads in shame are the well-known conservative Catholics who defended Maciel to the bitter end and who, in the process, heaped their own form of verbal abuse on his critics.

Contrary to their vigorous protestations, the Vatican's official communiqué regarding the recently concluded visitation of the Legionaries of Christ removes all doubts about Maciel's guilt.

The communiqué declares that Maciel's immoral and even criminal behavior has been "confirmed" by "incontrovertible evidence." The Vatican's statement also leaves room for the likelihood that some in the Legionaries' top leadership knew of Maciel's secret life and kept the knowledge from members, donors, defenders, and church officials alike.

Maciel duped his most loyal followers and supporters, leading many of them to believe that he was a great spiritual guide and even a living saint.

Gerald Renner never bought that line. On the contrary, he and Jason Berry exposed it as a lie.

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