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Papal delegate given broad powers over Legion

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service



Italian Archbishop Velasio De Paolis celebrates Mass at the Legionaries of Christ Center for Higher Studies in Rome July 10. (CNS photo/Marton Hegedus)

ROME -- Pope Benedict XVI has given his new papal delegate broad powers of authority over the Legionaries of Christ as part of a major Vatican-led reform of the order.

The delegate, Italian Archbishop Velasio De Paolis, has authority over the order's current superiors and can even override the order's constitutions. He will have a say in all areas of the order including its governance, decisions involving personnel, education and ordination, as well as how assets are spent.

In a letter to Archbishop De Paolis announcing him as papal delegate, the pope said the archbishop was to be in charge of the congregation of the Legionaries of Christ and all its members "for as long as it takes to carry out the path of renewal and lead it to the celebration of an extraordinary general chapter, whose main purpose will be to bring completion to the revision of the constitutions."

The letter, dated June 16, was made public on the Legionaries' website July 23.

Pope Benedict wrote that the results of the recent visitation of the order's religious houses and most of its pastoral institutions "made clear" the urgent need for an "in-depth revision of the institute's charism."

The pope also noted the "sincere zeal and fervent religious life of a great number of the congregation's members." He said that the papal delegate was also "a concrete sign of my closeness" and desire to help sustain and guide them on their journey toward reform.

The papal appointment was one of a number of steps Pope Benedict has taken in the reform of the Legionaries of Christ after revelations that the order's founder, the late Mexican Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, had fathered children and sexually abused seminarians.

In his letter, the pope said he chose Archbishop De Paolis for such an important mission because of his skill and experience in juridical and ecclesial matters, his spirit of service and his keen sense of religious life.

The 74-year-old archbishop is an expert in church law who specializes in religious institutes and has served on the governing body of his religious order, the Scalabrinians, and held the positions of counselor and procurator general for the order.

Archbishop De Paolis met with the order's superiors July 21 to present them with the Vatican decree, which specified the scope and nature of his authority.

The decree was written by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, July 9, and was approved by the pope. The order published the decree on its website July 23.

One of the 11 points outlined in the decree detailed "the broad authority" the papal delegate was granted over the entire institute, including the order's superiors on the general, provincial and local levels.

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The delegate is allowed to "even overrule the constitutions" if deemed necessary for the good of the order, it said.

The order's current leaders were to remain in their positions, it said, "unless it becomes necessary to provide otherwise."

The three-page decree said the Legionaries' leadership was to cooperate with the delegate and keep him informed of the life of the institute.

All decisions concerning governance, the appointment of personnel, admission to the novitiate and the priesthood, formation decisions, important administrative matters, and "the disposal of assets" must be approved by the papal delegate, it said.

Every member of the Legionaries of Christ has open access to the delegate and can deal personally with him, it said.

Any appeals against actions by the superiors can be directed to the delegate and any appeals against actions or decisions made by the delegate may be taken to the pope, the decree said.

"The paramount task of the papal delegate is to initiate, accompany and complete the revision of the constitutions," it said.

Archbishop De Paolis will lead a commission in charge of revising the order's constitutions, and all members of the order are to take an active part in the reform, including "revising and rewriting their own plan of Gospel living, always in harmony with the teaching of the church."

The archbishop also was granted permission to have four personal advisers to help him in his task. The four advisers had not been named as of July 23.

Archbishop De Paolis also will coordinate the visitation of the Legionaries' Regnum Christi movement as well as name the visitor. According to the Legionaries' website, the archbishop said the Vatican would release specific details about that visitation "at a future date."

Archbishop De Paolis was to meet with the Legionaries' general council again in early September "to plan the various tasks to be carried out," the website said.

The archbishop met with leaders of the order in Rome July 10 and distributed a letter he wrote to the priests and religious of the Legionaries.

He encouraged members to hold fast to their dedication to Jesus and said the reform was not about questioning one's vocation, "but for re-examining it in depth and renewing our adherence to it in a new spirit and more intense participation."

While some members may have already decided to leave the order, he urged caution and patience, saying, "A vocation is of too great import to decide it in a moment of turmoil."

The Vatican-led reform and renewal aim at revisiting the institute's charism and its constitutional norms in such a way that the constitutions will be freed "from elements that can cloud your charism," so that members can strengthen their relationship with Christ, he wrote.

He said the Vatican's intervention was necessary to save the order. Had the church not intervened, certain "facts, events and people," he wrote, "would have threatened the very roots of the congregation."

He asked that members rejoice in the gifts they have received from God and not become discouraged by the "sad events that are now behind you." Jesus has begun and wishes to complete his plan in each one of them and he has "kept you from the dangers that threatened you."

All members are called to help with the order's reform, he said.

"Your vocation and your congregation is in your hands, you are responsible for them. The church is with you; the Lord is merciful and generous," he said.

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