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A realist agenda for reform of the Legion

by John L. Allen Jr.



Archbishop Velasio De Paolis celebrates Mass at the Legionaries of Christ Center for Higher Studies in Rome July 10. The previous day, the Vatican had announced his appointment as the interim leader of the Legionaries while the Vatican investigation of the order proceeded. (CNS/Marton Hegedus)

In the months since Pope Benedict XVI launched an investigation of the Legionaries of Christ following revelations that its founder, the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, was guilty of sexual and financial misconduct stretching over decades, speculation has swirled about the future of the controversial order.

Some wondered if the Legionaries would be disbanded, while others asked if the current leadership would be swept aside. If neither happened, cynics questioned whether there will be any real change at all, something beyond the merely cosmetic.

The Vatican has now provided answers, which could be summarized as ?No, no, and we?ll see.?

They came in an Oct. 19 letter from Italian Archbishop Velasio De Paolis, who heads the Vatican's Prefecture for Economic Affairs, and who was appointed last July as a pontifical delegate to guide the

Legionaries through a process of reform.

De Paolis, a Scalabrinian Missionary, was recently named one of 24 new cardinals to be created by Benedict Nov. 20.

While conceding that "not a few things are to be changed or improved," De Paolis said that the Legion "not only survives, but is almost intact in its vitality," and that it is "a work of God at the service of his kingdom and his church."

That's a clear signal the Legion will endure. Worldwide, the Legionaries number 800 priests and 2,500 seminarians, while 70,000 people belong to its lay branch, Regnum Christi.

De Paolis also said the current superiors have been confirmed, and it's a mistake to assume they covered up Maciel's double life. There were rumors, De Paolis said, but "it is something else to have proof," which came "only much later, and gradually."

For more coverage of the reform of the Legionaries of Christ, see Tom Roberts' story:
Legion inquiry could have happened years ago

De Paolis said it might take two to three years, or more, before any reform is complete. In the meantime, he appealed for unity, warning of "certain shipwreck" if the Legionaries fight among themselves.

Several current and former members, speaking on background, say the revelations about Maciel spawned three currents with the Legionaries and their Regnum Christi network:

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- True believers who see these events as a trial sent by God, analogous to the period in the 1950s when Maciel was removed as the head of the order and subjected to a Vatican investigation related to charges of drug abuse. That time is known internally as the "Great Blessing," a test of faith that strengthened the order's resolve. A few might play down Maciel's failures, or make comparisons to King David in the Old Testament -- another flawed leader nevertheless chosen by God.
- Realists who understand the gravity of the revelations, and the steep challenge they pose to any religious order that draws inspiration from its founder, but who also believe that the vitality of the Legion and its commitment to the "new evangelization" called for by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI are fundamentally sound. They support some internal changes, especially distancing the order from Maciel, but not a 180-degree about-face.
- Root-and-branch reformers, whose agenda usually begins with removal of the current crop of superiors, on the grounds that trust cannot be rebuilt with the same people in charge. This group believes it's too easy to say, as De Paolis does in his letter, that Maciel's failures "cannot be transferred onto the Legion of Christ," without facing the ways his style permeated the order's structures and culture. They're prepared to start over almost from scratch, including a less centralized system of control.

The tension among the three groups isn't so much over whether reform should occur, but how sweeping it ought to be.

By most accounts, the first and third groups are relatively small, while the second represents the bulk of the membership. One current Legionary said the "true believers" have diminished significantly over the last 18 months, and today it would be difficult to find someone fitting that description. The root-and-branch camp may be strongest among American priests, shaped by cultural expectations of transparency and accountability.

The De Paolis letter has drawn positive reviews from realists, while it has disheartened some reformers who worry that it's a seal of approval on the status quo.

To be sure, that's not the only way of reading it. Italian Catholic writer Sandro Magister claims that in the coded argot of the Vatican, De Paolis actually has flung down a gauntlet against the Legion's present regime. By saying reform will take years, Magister claims, De Paolis "shattered the illusion" that it could be wrapped up quickly.

Whichever exegesis is correct, observers say there's another factor in handicapping which of the three visions might prevail: Some Legionaries in favor of dramatic overhaul have already left.

Jim Fair, spokesperson for the Legion in the United States, told *NCR* that two dozen Legionary priests have left worldwide following the recent scandals, with perhaps 10 in the United States. Other observers say those numbers do not reflect Legionaries who have decided to leave but have not completed the process, or those who are away pondering their options. Taking them into consideration, sources say, the number of exits is closer to 50 worldwide and more than 20 in the United States.

Measured against a global total of 800 priests, the number of defections is relatively small, but observers say they come disproportionately from the group seeking deep change.

Given all that, many observers believe the most likely scenario is a realist agenda for reform -- changes that go beyond mere tinkering, but fall short of the root-and-branch vision.

In terms of framing that agenda, De Paolis ticked off several areas: the relationship between Maciel's vision and the current reality of the Legion; the exercise of authority; freedom of conscience, including the selection of spiritual directors and confessors; and the appointment of superiors.

Observers say a key litmus test for assessing the seriousness of reform will be on authority -- whether members are granted more personal freedom, and whether there are greater checks and balances on those in charge.

For example, sources say, Legionaries currently have limited access to the Internet, and superiors review personal correspondence. Members do not have personal bank accounts or credit cards; technically, the only thing a Legionary owns is a crucifix. While many find that an admirable commitment to poverty, critics say it also makes a member dependent on leaders with the authority to dispense funds.

Some steps have already been taken. In response to a Vatican directive in 2006, Legionary superiors stopped offering spiritual direction to members under their authority. A "private vow," in which members pledged not to criticize superiors, was also suppressed.

In general, some observers charge there has long been an overemphasis on obedience, especially to central authorities in Rome. Provincial structures, these observers say, are relatively weak, and the rules stack the deck in favor of incumbents when a general chapter is called to elect leadership.

Culturally, some say, a strong emphasis on "unity and charity" sometimes translates into a gag order on dissent.

Another question is the extent to which references to Maciel are eliminated, including in the Legion's process of formation and its spiritual life.

That too, sources told *NCR*, is a debated point. Some in the Legion still refer to Maciel as *nuestro padre*, "our father," while others say that language makes "a chill run down our spines."

One Legionary said the issue isn't so much whether to excise Maciel's legacy, but how, and that it's "truly complicated" given how interwoven it is throughout the order's life.

De Paolis said three commissions will likely need to be formed. One will deal with revision of the order's constitutions, a second to handle specific claims against the Legion, and a third on financial matters.

Perhaps the commission on finances will face the most dramatic immediate challenges. Sources say the recent scandals have triggered a steep drop in donations, aggravating a debt load variously estimated at somewhere between \$100 million and \$300 million worldwide. Fair said he could not confirm any numbers, because "the Legion is connected to a multitude of various entities with various obligations."

One Legionary said the order is preparing to sell off properties, and that going forward it's important to build transparent financial systems to reassure potential benefactors.

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