

George Weigel: Whitewashing history

Jason Berry | Dec. 30, 2010



George Weigel speaking in Atlanta in 2007 (CNS)

Analysis

George Weigel, Pope John Paul II biographer and a leading conservative voice at the Washington-based Ethics and Public Policy Center, has recently become a critic of the Legion of Christ, the scandal-racked religious order, after years of supporting it while dismissing complaints and charges against its founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

Among high-profile U.S. Catholic conservatives who long defended Maciel while denigrating his accusers, Weigel alone has made a turnabout in urging Legion reforms.

However, he continues to go out of his way, as he has for years, to excuse the late Pope John Paul II from any culpability in the Legion scandal. It was John Paul, more than anyone else, who backed Maciel and the Legion and elevated both in church status.

"I have been deeply impressed by the work of the Legionaries of Christ in the United States, in Mexico, and in Rome," Weigel wrote on a Legion Web site in 2002. "If Father Maciel and his charism as a founder are to be judged by the fruits of his work, those fruits are most impressive indeed."

Published accusations against Maciel first surfaced in 1997. In a report coauthored by this writer in Connecticut's *Hartford Courant*, nine men, interviewed in the United States and Mexico, charged that Maciel had molested them in Spain and Italy during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Several said Maciel told them he had permission from Pope Pius XII to seek them out sexually for relief of physical pain.

U.S. Catholic conservative voices, including Catholic League president William Donohue and political activist Deal Hudson, defended Maciel at the time. Other conservatives had offered their continued support for the Legion founder. Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Mary Ann Glendon, and CNN political analyst Bill Bennett were among them. Glendon, now a Harvard law professor, scoffed at "old slanders" and in a letter dated May 23, 2002, called Maciel a man of "radiant holiness."

Weigel's own endorsement came a month later. Both of their statements followed the April 2002 meeting of the U.S. cardinals with John Paul in Rome to discuss the abuse crisis. With clergy sex abuse receiving more media coverage, it was a period in which Legion leaders wanted to shore up Maciel's reputation amid heavy scrutiny.

Read the NCR editorial about Maciel and the Legion reform: [Truth and a call to renewal](#) [1]

The defense of Maciel by conservative Catholics gave valuable cover to Maciel as the Legion struck back against the men from Mexico and Spain who had come forward to relate that they had been sexually abused by Maciel when they were teenage seminarians.

To say that Weigel, Glendon and Neuhaus ? who asserted Maciel's innocence as "a moral certainty" ? were duped is to overstate the obvious. Clearly, they were influenced by John Paul's own personal support for Maciel.

A larger question is why not one of those supporters bothered to sit down with the men who had accused Maciel, including Juan Vaca, the first to come forward with charges in a document he sent to Pope Paul VI in 1976, or Fr. Felix Alarcón, or the other six survivors, to hear what they had to say.

In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI banished Maciel from active ministry.

One week after the Feb. 2, 2009, news that Maciel had led a double life and had fathered a daughter, and after several priests quit the Legion, Weigel posed questions about the Legion in an essay on the *First Things* Web site, published by the conservative Institute on Religion and Public Life in Washington.

Many people with friends among "Legionary priests have known for years [that] there is great good here, as there is among the faithful members of Regnum Christi," Weigel wrote. "How shall that good be saved?" He called for a "root-and-branch examination" and "a brutally frank analysis of the institutional culture" by the Vatican. "Can the Legion be reformed from within, after those complicit in the Maciel web of deceit have been dismissed?"

Sanitizing the past

Today Weigel is the leading conservative voice urging Legion reform. Yet his demands for Vatican probity are preceded by a lengthy record of whitewashing John Paul's failure in the abuse crisis. In two biographies of the late pope, and in a 2002 book, *The Courage to Be Catholic: Crisis, Reform and the Future of the Church*, Weigel's treatment of the abuse crisis is marred by his blindness to a host of early reports and books on what sociologist Fr. Andrew M. Greeley called, in 1992, "the greatest scandal in the history of religion in America." The first volume of Weigel's papal biography, in 1999, completely avoids the issue. When the Boston scandal in 2002 forced John Paul to deal with it, Weigel flew to Rome as an ad hoc papal advisor.

Weigel is the rare writer not in the Legion's employ to get an interview with Maciel. After the 1997 *Hartford Courant* report, Maciel shunned journalists, even canceling a speech in Chicago for fear of facing reporters. Weigel's 2010 book, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II ? the Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy*, notes that he interviewed Maciel on Feb. 19, 1998. Weigel does not quote Maciel, nor explain what he asked or what Maciel said, other than that John Paul broke a "logjam in 1983" for the approval of the Legion constitutions.

John Paul "may well have been ill served by associates and subordinates who ought to have been more alert to the implications of [Maciel's] cult of personality," writes Weigel. "The reasons that those associates and

subordinates were skeptical of the charges will be investigated and debated for years." This, from a writer who had 10 interviews with John Paul for the 1999 book and better access to curial "associates" than most journalists at the Vatican.

"Despite the negative implications of John Paul's reputation that some of [his] critics quickly drew," Weigel writes, "what was at work in this scandalous affair was deception in the service of the *mysterium iniquitatis*" ? the mystery of evil.

And so we are left to believe that one of the great moral leaders of the last century was deceived by the "mystery of evil."

Vatican politics

Weigel airbrushes any reference to Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano pressuring then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to halt the Maciel prosecution from 1998 to 2004, and to the significant sums of money that Maciel advanced to both Sodano and papal secretary Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz ([NCR, April 06, 2010](#) [2]). Of Dziwisz, a pivotal Maciel supporter, Weigel simply notes that the Polish prelate was "susceptible to misreading personalities." (Dziwisz has refused to answer *NCR* questions.)

What made John Paul insist on praising Maciel for years after the 1998 canonical filing by ex-Legion victims at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith? *NCR's* John L. Allen Jr. reported in 2004 that John Paul and his senior advisers simply did not believe the accusations. Yet no one in Vatican inner circle felt the moral urgency to speak to Vaca or the seven other ex-Legionaries mentioned in the doctrinal congregation case.

Heaping blame on Maciel is easy now: He's dead. Why did the Vatican legal system break down? Why did John Paul not demand a probe of Maciel? The deeper mystery is why he could not bring himself to confront the larger crisis Maciel personified.

In 1999, a year after his Maciel interview, Weigel published a 992-page papal biography. *Witness to Hope* chronicles John Paul's life from childhood and priesthood in Poland, under the Nazi darkness, then communism, through the milestone events as pontiff with lucid analysis of his philosophical, theological and political thinking. Weigel credits Maciel with helping to persuade the president of Mexico in 1979 to meet John Paul at the airport on his first papal trip to Latin America. Not a word on the allegations against Maciel from 1997. The book ignores widely reported clergy abuse cases that rocked America and Ireland in the 1990s: the charges that brought down Covenant House founder Fr. Bruce Ritter; the resignation of Archbishop Robert Sanchez of Santa Fe, N.M., amid allegations from young women; the \$119 million jury verdict against the Dallas diocese in 1997 that was a subject of great conversation in the Congregation for the Clergy, according to former priest Christopher Kunze, who worked there at the time. Were these not issues for the pope?

Jonathan Kwitney's biography *Man of the Century: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II*, published two years before Weigel's, examines the abuse scandals with a straightforward approach, faulting John Paul for denial. A former *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, Kwitney, now deceased, wrote admiringly of John Paul's geopolitical triumphs and great pastoral gifts, yet with a moderately critical view of the pope's reaction to such internal church matters as celibacy and women's ordination.

Weigel wrote on the abuse issue in 1999:

Recruitment to seminaries had plummeted in the developed world, and seminaries themselves had experienced conditions ranging from confusion to turmoil since Vatican II. Discipline among the clergy faltered, and while statistical evidence demonstrated that malfeasance among Roman Catholic priests was no more severe (in absolute and relative terms) than among the clergy of other Christian denominations or

among professionals in society, scandals involving priests were evils in themselves and another barrier to recruitment and reform within the presbyterate.

The issue of whether the priesthood had a greater proportion of child molesters than other denominations or professions had no consensus at the time. Nor does one exist today. Weigel's "evidence" source was Philip Jenkins' *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis*, a 1996 book based on secondary sources rather than church files unearthed by discovery subpoenas. Jenkins argued that the 1990s scandals were a construction of the media, abetted by liberal Catholics, notably Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, who became an advocate for victims of clergy sex abuse, and Greeley. Jenkins' theory collapsed in the 2002 media coverage that revealed bishops had concealed child molesters in many dioceses. Jenkins works as an expert witness for dioceses facing abuse cases; according to his own sworn testimony, he charges \$450 per hour.

Weigel implies that John Paul was not properly briefed in the 1990s. Were the papal nuncios in Washington and in Dublin, Ireland, censoring their diplomatic cables home? In March 1985, Doyle was a canonist working in the Vatican Embassy. "I prepared a 42-page detailed report explaining the issue in graphic details," he told *NCR*. "My boss, the papal nuncio, Archbishop Pio Laghi, signed it. The document was personally given by [Philadelphia] Cardinal John Krol to the pope. I distinctly recall Laghi saying many times that 'my superiors in Rome' said this or that in response. There was a great deal of telephone traffic about it too."

In 1989 the American bishops sent canon lawyers to Rome, seeking the authority to defrock pedophiles without going through the long wait for such decisions from the pope. John Paul said no. Kwitney reports that John Paul was resistant to judging priests.

In April 2002, as *The Boston Globe* reports ignited international news coverage damaging to the Vatican, Weigel as an adviser to John Paul in Rome was quoted in the press. John Paul, in deteriorating health from Parkinson's disease, summoned the American cardinals to discuss the crisis. Several high-ranking cardinals and canonists defended church secrecy, impugning the media for anti-Catholic bias. Later that year, Weigel published *The Courage to Be Catholic*, and wrote scornfully of Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos' blunders at a press conference: "Some suggested that the cardinal's wooden performance had something to do with his alleged papal ambitions." But as Weigel took the curia to task, he was filling holes in the 1999 biography. Weigel blamed the Vatican bureaucracy for failing to keep the pope advised. Although the Holy See had a sophisticated Web site and the Vatican Press Office disseminated daily news digests of papal activities by e-mail, Weigel wrote:

The church in the United States expected that the Vatican was living through the American Catholic trauma of early 2002 in real time through adequate information from the Washington nunciature. The Vatican wasn't, because the Vatican is simply not part of the Internet culture and the information flow from Washington was inadequate. That created an expectations gap that widened and deepened during the first three months of the crisis.

The "expectations gap" had nothing to do with the Internet; it had been building since at least 1989 when the U.S. bishops failed to get permission from John Paul to laicize pedophiles. As a decade of scandals followed, John Paul was largely silent, particularly at the 1995 resignation of Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër of Vienna, whose sexual transgressions with youths provoked a scandal in Austria. John Paul had plucked Groër from obscurity to become an archbishop.

For Weigel, "the crisis" begins in 2002, a position consistent with its absence from his 1999 John Paul biography. The 2002 book cites a litany of scandals, including gay seminarians dancing at the North American College in Rome. Weigel decries a loss of orthodox bearings. He does not spare bishops: "Episcopal misgovernance came in many forms: bishops who took a cavalier attitude toward sexual abuse; bishops who knowingly transferred sexual abusers ? who misled other bishops about known sexual abusers; bishops who saw

the crisis of clerical sexual abuse in primarily legal and financial terms ? bishops who failed to clean up their seminaries."

John Paul appointed many of those bishops. The vetting process, which excluded lay involvement, eliminated any candidate for the episcopacy who had endorsed optional celibacy or women priests. The gay subculture Weigel scorns arose as thousands of men left the priesthood to marry after Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, in which he called celibacy the church's "brilliant jewel."

Weigel ignores a substantial body of work on clerical life from the 1970s and 1980s by Greeley, psychologist Eugene Kennedy, author A.W. Richard Sipe, and the late psychiatrist Conrad Baars, who delivered a 1971 report at the Vatican, "The Role of the Church in the Causation, Treatment and Prevention of the Crisis in the Priesthood."

Weigel ignores a longstanding body of literature by these and other Catholic social scientists on the symptoms of crisis, even pathology, in clerical culture. "The deepest root of the crisis of episcopal misgovernance," wrote Weigel, "is theological. ? Too many bishops in the United States have traded the rich evangelical, pastoral and sacramental patrimony that is theirs for the mess of pottage that is contemporary management theory."

Read the first part of this report here: [Gambling with history: Benedict and the Legion of Christ](#)
[3]

[Jason Berry is an author and producer of a film documentary on Maciel, "Vows of Silence." The Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute provided support for this article.]

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