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Corapi: I won't leave Montana to live with order

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Father John Corapi said he will not follow the order of his religious superior to leave his home in Montana to live in community with his fellow priests.

In a posting on his website July 7, Father Corapi also said he was told to support himself and his ministry financially by Father James Flanagan, the founder of his congregation, the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

Father Corapi, who lives near Kalispell, Mont., also denied committing sexual improprieties with a female former employee whose allegations in letters to church leaders nationwide prompted officials of his religious community to place him on administrative leave in March.

The statement from the widely popular speaker on Catholic catechetical and contemporary issues came in response to a July 5 press release from the society outlining transgressions related to Father Corapi's lifestyle that it said were uncovered during an investigation by a three-member fact-finding panel appointed by the religious order.

Information about Father Corapi learned during the inquiry, the release said, included "years of cohabitation" with a woman, repeated abuse of alcohol and drugs and "serious violation" of his promise of poverty based on his ownership of more than \$1 million in real estate, numerous luxury vehicles, motorcycles, an ATV, a boat dock and several motor boats.

Father Corapi said he would not return to the order because he resigned from the priesthood June 17, two days short of the 20th anniversary of his ordination.

"I resigned because the process used by the church is grossly unjust, and, hence, immoral," he wrote in the posting at www.theblacksheepdog.us. "I resigned because I had no chance from the beginning of a fair

and just hearing. As I have indicated from the beginning of all this, I am not extinguished!

"If I were to commit to the suggestion of the society, then I would essentially crawl under a rock and wait to die," the priest said.

Father Gerard Sheehan, regional priest servant of the congregation, also known as SOLT, said in its press release that Father Corapi was ordered to live at the society's regional headquarters in Robstown, Texas, and to dismiss a civil suit he filed against the former employee for breach of contract.

Several calls from Catholic News Service to Father Sheehan and Father Corapi and his attorneys were not returned.

The lawsuit filed April 4 in the 11th District Court in Flathead County, Mont., accuses Tamra Sexton, a former employee of the priest's company, Santa Cruz Media Inc., of writing a letter that contained "numerous false, malicious and unprivileged statements." The suit denied allegations that Father Corapi had sex with Sexton and other women, punched Sexton in the face, bought and used drugs and had a "new mistress."

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Based in Kalispell, Santa Cruz Media is the for-profit company that sells Father Corapi's books, DVDs, and other video and audio recordings.

Father Corapi also said in the suit that Sexton was fired from her job at Santa Cruz Media Sept. 30, 2009. The suit said both parties signed a separation agreement that required Sexton not to "interfere with, disparage or otherwise cast a negative light on Santa Cruz or John Corapi or their activities."

The release said the lawsuit was filed in the midst of the order's investigation and that the three investigators learned that Father Corapi offered \$100,000 to Sexton for her silence.

Other key witnesses from Santa Cruz Media who "may have negotiated contracts ... that precluded them from speaking" with the congregation's investigative team declined to answer its questions or provide documents, the release said.

Father Corapi did not address the lawsuit in his posting, but denied offering to pay "anybody off to remain silent." He said having employees and independent contractors sign separation agreements was standard practice in business. CNS also made several calls to Sexton but none were returned.

He also said he declined to participate in the SOLT investigation on the advice of his attorneys "until I was able to determine that the commission's process was fair and I had adequate rights to defend myself."

Father Corapi charged that the order's fact-finding team failed to answer questions he posed "that certainly qualify the validity of any legal case."

The blog posting also said that when Father Corapi established his preaching ministry, Father Flanagan, SOLT's founder, cited the "unique nature" of his preaching mission, which involved widespread travel to address audiences around the country, as the reason the congregation could not support him financially.

"As Father Flanagan encouraged, I have supported SOLT and myself from day one," Father Corapi wrote. "I have never relied on the society for shelter, clothing, transportation, medical care or legal counsel and

instead, using my history of success in business, set up my mission as any savvy businessman would, meanwhile continuing to support the society and many other Catholic charities."

Father Corapi's posting did not address his real estate holdings or vehicle ownership.

Meanwhile, Bishop George Leo Thomas of Helena, Mont., the diocese in which Father Corapi lives, told CNS July 5 that he met with the priest only once, about five years ago, to discuss his work.

"I told him I do not allow freelancing," Bishop Thomas said. "I want any ministry to go through my office. He never did that.

"He had a very low profile (in the diocese)," the bishop added. "To this day very little is known about him."

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