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Benedict careful about Catholic 'new movements'

by John L. Allen Jr.

To be sure, it's not that Benedict opposes the movements, a constellation of new lay groups and religious orders founded in the 20th century and known both for loyalty to Rome and success in attracting vocations, especially among the young. On the contrary, the pope has made his broad support clear: Consecrated women associated with Communion and Liberation, one of these movements, staff his personal household, and Benedict tapped members of the Legionaries of Christ to serve his recent Christmas midnight Mass. So far, Benedict has also named as bishops six members of Opus Dei, commonly numbered among the movements though it is technically a "personal prelature."

During the John Paul years critics sometimes grouched that the Vatican was overly indulgent with the movements, looking the other way at charges of misconduct or violations of church discipline. By way of contrast, Benedict has shown a greater willingness to demand that the movements play by the same rules as more established Catholic orders and lay groups.

Most observers say that Benedict has not sought out occasions to rein in the movements, but rather has been more disposed than his predecessor to take action on a case-by-case basis as problems arise.

The most recent example has come with Lumen Dei (the "Light of God"), a body of priests, consecrated women and married laity founded in 1967 in Cusco, Peru, by a Spanish-born Jesuit named Fr. Rodrigo Molina, who died in 2002. It currently numbers some 650 members in 71 dioceses, principally in Spain and Latin America.

Dedicated to service of the poor, Lumen Dei is also known for a deeply traditional spirituality, including a regime of physical discipline for members, including sleeping on wooden boards, a limited and deliberately bland diet, and punishments such as kneeling on objects designed to inflict pain. Lumen Dei operates roughly 20 schools both in Spain and in some Latin American countries.



In recent years, a few members of Lumen Dei have

complained about various alleged irregularities, including financial mismanagement, abuses of authority and even sexual abuse. Although an inquest by the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life apparently did not establish specific acts of wrongdoing, the congregation nonetheless decided in May to depose the group's leadership, citing internal "division and confusion."

Retired Archbishop Fernando Sebastián Aguilar of Pamplona, Spain, a Claretian with no previous ties to Lumen Dei, was imposed as the group's interim superior, with the title of "papal commissioner." Sources told *NCR* that Sebastián's mandate is to help Lumen Dei come up with an internal constitution acceptable to the Vatican, and to groom a new leadership team willing to implement it.

In response, members of Lumen Dei filed an appeal with the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's Supreme Court, seeking to block the appointment. In September, the Signatura rejected that request, in one of the first decisions signed by the court's new prefect -- Archbishop Raymond Burke, former archbishop of St. Louis. (The decree did not address the substance of the members' complaint, but rather refused to suspend the appointment of a papal commissioner.)

In mid-December, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state, wrote to members of Lumen Dei instructing that each member write to Sebastián to indicate submission or "look somewhere else" for their spiritual path. Sebastián has set a deadline of Jan. 24 for those letters to arrive at the group's Madrid headquarters.

The crackdown on Lumen Dei is the latest example of growing Vatican willingness to take action against the new movements. Other instances include:

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- In May 2005, just one month after Benedict's election, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith removed Fr. Gino Burrelli, founder of a new religious order called the Congregation of the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, from active ministry. The official motive was alleged abuses of confession and spiritual direction, though Burrelli also faced accusations of sexual abuse dating to the 1970s and '80s.
- In December 2005, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a ruling directed at the Neocatechumenal Way, a program of spiritual formation launched in Spain in 1964. It insisted that the Neocatechumenate obey the general liturgical rules of the church on matters where the group had previously followed its own customs. (Last June, a comprehensive set of statutes for the Neocatechumenate, incorporating the rulings on liturgy, was approved by the Vatican.)
- In May 2006, the Vatican instructed Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ,

to observe “a life of prayer and penance” in the wake of accusations of sexual abuse lodged by former members. The Vatican’s previous unwillingness to act on these charges, which first became public in 1997, was frequently cited as the leading example of an alleged “blank check” for the movements during the John Paul years. Maciel died in January 2008.

Speaking on background, a senior Vatican official said that the effort under Benedict XVI appears to be to commend the zeal of the new movements, but also to insist that they “mature,” accepting the authority of the pope and the bishops and following the established laws of the church.

That effort may be setting a pattern for church officials at other levels. Last June, for example, Archbishop Edwin O’Brien of Baltimore issued a ruling demanding greater transparency from the Legionaries of Christ and their lay arm, Regnum Christi, and barring them from one-on-one spiritual counseling with anyone under 18.

At the time, O’Brien said that while the Legionaries and Regnum Christi “do a lot of good work,” he also cited an “endemic” sense of secrecy that in his view needed to change.

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