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Maciel admission raises questions for a hurting order

by Thomas C. Fox

As the last tattered shreds of public resistance inside the Legion of Christ gave way to overwhelming evidence that the order's founder had led a deceptive, double life, questions regarding its future have taken a foothold.

Shocked members, supporters and church observers began asking questions. Some called for investigations to learn who in the order might have enabled Fr. Marcial Maciel to cover a part of his life, making indelibly making a story of deception central to the Legionaries history. Other said that it would be wise to dissolve the Legion of Christ and start a new order from scratch.

At the center of the turmoil is the deceased Maciel, long accused of numerous acts of sex abuse but having gained focused scrutiny with the admissions Feb. 4 by Legion officials that he had had a mistress and fathered a daughter.

Maciel, viewed by some as a saint, by others as a cult figure, died last year at the age of 87. The Legion claims over 800 priests and 2,500 seminarians worldwide.

Tortured reports of distraught Maciel supporters surfaced. A former member of Regnum Christi, a Legion support network, reported that when priests in Atlanta delivered the new revelations at a three-day silent retreat, "Women began sobbing."

Tom Hoopes, editor of the *National Catholic Register*, a weekly published by the Legion, issued a Feb. 3 apology on an Internet blog. "All, I want to say is, I'm sorry. I want to say it here, because I defended Fr. Maciel that I'm sorry to the victims, who were victims twice, the second time by calumny. I'm sorry, to the Church, which has been damaged. I'm sorry, to those I've misled."

Father Alvaro Corcuera, director general of the Legionaries and Regnum Christi, the Legion lay support

group, said that the order is "living a time of pain and suffering."

In an undated letter, Corcuera did not specifically identify the actions of the Legionaries' founder, but wrote that "these things that have hurt and surprised us -- and I don't believe we can explain with our reason alone -- have already been judged by God."

The news of Maciel had fathered a child was all the more damaging because it flew in the face of people who had for years defended Maciel against other accusations of misconduct. It was on Feb. 23, 1997, in an article in *The Hartford Courant*, that a darker version of Maciel's life first emerged, tainting the official version. Reporters Jason Berry and Gerald Renner dogged the story for years. Their reports appeared in the *Courant* and *National Catholic Reporter*

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The journalists reported that nine professional men alleged publicly that Maciel had molested them when they were young men, as young as 12, in Legion seminaries in Spain and Italy during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Maciel's accusers included three professors, a priest, a teacher, an engineer, a rancher and a lawyer. One of the professors, a former priest who died in 1995, left behind an accusatory deathbed statement.

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The accusers said they had decided to go public because Pope John Paul II had not responded to letters from two priests sent through church channels in 1978 and again in 1989 seeking an investigation. In fact, they said, it was after the pope praised Maciel in 1994 as an "efficacious guide to youth" that they decided to make their accusations public.

In a letter to the editor of *The Courant* published on March 2, 1997, Maciel denied the accusations as "defamations and falsities with no foundation whatsoever" and said he was praying for his accusers.

None of Maciel's accusers filed legal action or sought financial compensation from the Legionaries or the Catholic church. They said all they sought was accountability by church authorities for what they said was Maciel's sexual misconduct.

While the Vatican maintained silence on the issue, Maciel continued to command intense loyalty, raised enormous sums of money, and won the special favor of Pope John Paul II and other high Vatican officials. Meanwhile, the accusers faced ridicule, vilification and institutional scorn from duped Maciel followers. The charges, however, persisted. In 2006 Pope Benedict did something rare and unexpected: He openly broke with his predecessor.

The Vatican took action against Maciel. While it decided against a full church trial, citing Maciel's age and poor health, it acknowledged unspecified misconduct. The Vatican never recognized Maciel's victims, asking that Maciel lead a "reserved life of prayer and penance."

Maciel's departure as Legion head was hardly a moment of shame.

The Vatican's top official for religious orders, speaking of Maciel as he stepped down from leadership of the Legionaries, called him "the instrument chosen by God to carry out one of the great spiritual designs in the church of the 20th century." Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano came to his friend Maciel's defense, hailing "the great work that you do."

Not all saw the departure in this light. This paper, in May 2006, lamented with an editorial which, in part, read: "Faced with compelling evidence and repeated warnings, John Paul exhibited no sense of the need to investigate credible claims immediately. Instead, he lavished on Maciel the perks of privilege. He gave him a place of honor during some of his international travels, bestowed special benefits upon his order and even hailed him as 'an efficacious guide to youth,' a horrible and tragic misreading of reality. The level of Maciel's deception and the gullibility of church officials is difficult to comprehend."

To many, especially the victims, the forced Maciel departure was seen as mild slap on the wrist and out of proportion to the magnitude of the sexual abuses that had occurred.

Juan Vaca, 69 at the time, was the former Legion priest who in 1976 first sent a series of petitions to the Vatican detailing allegations of abuse against 20 seminarians spoke out. He lamented to *NCR* that the Vatican had made no mention of the victims. "I think the communiqué," he said, "was concocted with the Legion participating in its drafting."

As the news of Maciel's paternity spread in recent days, troubling identity questions about the future of the Legion of Christ order took hard form. How could an order so identified, so reflective of the personality of its founder, possibly survive? Some suggested shutting it down and starting a new institute.

In an open letter to the Legionnaires published on the blog, "The American Papist," Dr. Germain Grisez, Flynn Professor of Christian Ethics at Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland, expressed the opinion that "nothing short of establishing an entirely new institute" would bring need fresh light and new life to the order.

He called for an outside investigation "to identify those complicit in Father Maciel's wrongdoing and its concealment until now." He called for "an orderly termination of the existing Institute, election of a small group to serve as founders of its replacement, and the preparation of an entirely new and reformed body of particular law for the new institute."

Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, asked if he felt an order could survive without being able to venerate its founder, responded, "I think it makes it difficult, but not impossible."

Legion of Christ Father Owen Kearns, reflecting some of the complex emotions stirred by the Maciel news, wrote Feb. 6 on the website of the National Catholic Register, affiliated with the Legion:

"I'm saddened first of all for all those hurt by his misdeeds. They need comfort only God can give; they need your prayers. It's hard to reconcile all of this with the gratitude I still feel for my founder. ... How to reconcile such contraries? When our spirit is in turmoil, we need to know where to turn. In prayer, and close to the Heart of Christ, is where we find peace."

Another view was reflected in a posting under a Maciel related article on the *NCR* website Feb. 5, written by someone who identified himself as a former Legionary.

"Much of Maciel's deceptive and manipulative characteristics are incorporated into the 'charisma' of the

Legion,? he wrote. ?It is very hard to separate the legion from the founder - we were expected to imitate him in every way possible - from the way he combed his hair to the way he consecrated the Host. If in doubt about how to behave, we were told to think: what would Maciel do.?

Fox is NCR Editor

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