

Maciel's hometown still sees a hero

Dennis Coday | Feb. 11, 2009

COTIJA, Mexico -- Elderly residents of Cotija recall stories of the young man with a "gift," whom they suspected would go on to greatly influence the Catholic church. Younger residents remember a benefactor priest who never forgot his roots and showed a deep concern for the community's spiritual and material needs.

So when allegations of sexual abuse of young men surfaced against the priest and, more recently, the acknowledgment by the Legionaries of Christ that their founder fathered a child, many in Cotija failed to allow the news to negatively color their views of the late Father Marcial Maciel Degollado.

"Fr. Maciel, with the mistakes that he committed, with all that has come about, continues being Cojita's greatest man," said local historian Javier Valencia, a fabric merchant who had known the priest since childhood. "He was the pride of Cotija (and) continues being the pride of Cotija."

Others outright dismissed stories of Maciel leading a double life. Among them were Elena Mejia, 87, who worked as a domestic servant in the Maciel household, attended the first Mass the young priest celebrated in Our Lady of Popolo Parish, and recalled the generosity on display during his frequent visits back to Cotija.

"They're lies," she said of the alleged wrongdoings.

Her younger sister, Teresa, who also worked on occasion in the Maciel home, added, "I always say, 'A tree will be known for its fruits.'"

Those fruits in Cotija involved acts of service in the early years. The Mejia sisters recalled Maciel being a special child, who was called "Dummy" by his brothers but who also showed a special devotion to spiritual matters. After finishing his seminary studies, he returned regularly to Cotija, where he would distribute serapes, small statues of Christ and even cash.

"Fr. Maciel helped many people economically," said Elena Silva Trejo, another local historian, whose father, a tailor, made suits for Maciel. "People, poor people, would line up to look for something."

The charity projects expanded in scope as the Legionaries of Christ grew in size and economic stature. Within the last decade, the Altius Foundation, a Legionaries organization, worked with the federal, state and local governments to open a museum and a medical clinic that provides consultations for 10 pesos -- less than \$1. A university that charges modest tuition also was opened. An official in City Hall acknowledged that a steady stream of visitors affiliated with the Legionaries of Christ continues providing a significant economic boost.

With his deeds, Maciel became a local benefactor, something sorely needed in Cotija, a town of some 12,000 inhabitants known for farmers that make a salty cheese deemed so good it has won international culinary awards. The town about 315 miles west of Mexico City also is known for the departure of migrants in large numbers. Maciel is credited with restoring some local pride, according to many locals, as other towns in the region had surpassed Cotija economically.

"He is the one that helped Cotija the most," Valencia said. "Fr. Maciel was a man that had a lot of affection for his community."

Nowhere is the affection reciprocated as strongly as in a nearby settlement known as El Barrio, home to Our Lady of San Juan del Barrio Parish. The old sanctuary at the site is home to a revered icon for which the parish is named and which regularly is paraded through local neighborhoods. The parish boasts a rich history; it hosted a final Mass in 1929 on the eve of soldiers fighting in the Cristero Rebellion laying down their arms. Maciel, whose funeral Mass was celebrated in the church in 2008, was key in restoring the old sanctuary, which had fallen into a state of disrepair.

Legionaries Father Patrick Barry, a Maryland native who has worked in Cotija for five years, said the restoration project reflected Maciel's approach of "works more than words."

The priest acknowledged that Maciel shaped Cotija through his public works and ministry. But he also said that Cotija, with its centuries-old tradition of Catholic devotion, shaped Maciel and the Legionaries of Christ.

"Everything that he learned here, he took not only to other parts of Mexico, but rather many parts of the world as well," Father Barry said.

The depth and enduring devotion to the Catholic faith quickly becomes evident upon arriving in Cotija. Faded portraits of St. Rafael Guizar Valencia -- Maciel's great-uncle -- grace doorways along a stretch of Calle Madero, leading from the outskirts of Cotija toward Our Lady of Popolo Parish. Posters of Our Lady of Guadalupe are commonly spotted through open windows. Small stickers on metal doors read "This home is Catholic," an admonishment for missionaries from various sects to move along.

The enduring esteem shown toward Maciel also becomes apparent in conversations with residents along the street and in the town center -- many of the interviewees were unwilling to allow allegations of abuse and immorality to negatively impact their opinions of his works in Cotija.

"I think that God should be the final judge," said Rosa Maria Rangel, who runs a cheese store.

She added that few in Cotija held negative opinions of Maciel, prompting one young employee to object.

When asked why she held a negative opinion, Leobardo Medina, 26, responded, "For what he did."

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