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Banker served as Legion of Christ benefactor's insulator, facilitator

Tom Gallagher | Feb. 18, 2013
Legion of Christ investigation

Editor's note: Robert G. Sylvestre, of Westerly, R.I., who spent 35 years -- his entire career -- in the trust department at Fleet Bank, now Bank of America, played a pivotal role in the lives of Timothy Mee and his widow, Gabrielle Mee, for 25 years. A lifelong Catholic, Sylvestre attended La Salle Academy and Providence College in Providence, R.I. It was Sylvestre who introduced Gabrielle Mee to the Legion of Christ. Sylvestre was deposed in September 2011 by lawyers representing the Legion of Christ; Gabrielle Mee's niece, Mary Lou Dauray; the Estate of Mrs. Mee; and Bank of America and Sylvestre. The following story is based on Sylvestre's deposition.See all stories in this series[1].

Robert "Bob" Sylvestre began working in 1960 for Fleet Bank while attending Providence College, and in 1967 or 1968 became a trust officer. It was about this time he met Timothy Mee and was assigned his trust account. For the next 17 years, until his client died in 1985, Sylvestre played a pivotal role in Mee's estate planning and financial affairs.

"I knew them well," said Sylvestre of Mee and his wife, Gabrielle.

Timothy Mee, who also served on the board of directors of Fleet Bank and was a shareholder there, had lost his first wife and twin boys "in the '38 hurricane," Sylvestre testified. Years later, in 1948, Mee married Gabrielle. Sylvestre said he came to know her when "I met with Tim a number of times at his home, and she was present."

Sylvestre's close relationship with Timothy Mee was professional, he said. The two did not socialize. However, he was "a client I felt very strongly towards," Sylvestre said.

Sylvestre and Mee spoke two to three times a week on a wide variety of topics related to an existing trust and financial matters. Fleet Bank managed all of the Mees' assets. They met face-to-face either at the Fleet Bank office in Providence, at the Mees' home in Smithfield or at a condo in Narragansett, R.I.

Mee was not very philanthropic during his lifetime, according to Sylvestre. "I don't recall that he made any significant or any charitable contributions before I left or before he died," Sylvestre said.

Mee also excluded family from his estate planning. According to Sylvestre, he said his family "was not to be considered. They could all fend for themselves. His primary interest was to put that money to work in some type of charitable form [after his death]."

Mee maintained a strictly conservative Catholic faith. "He wasn't open to a lot of change," Sylvestre said. "He would have frowned upon, for example, priests going out on the street without their hat, which became much more popular towards the end of his life. The Legionaries were like looking at a religious order of the '60s. They never left anyplace without the hat."

At this point, Gabrielle Mee and Sylvestre began to work closely together by necessity.

He said he knew her "quite well, particularly after Mr. Mee died [in 1985] because the conversations ... were between myself and her rather than myself and Tim."

Sylvestre described her as "a very bright, strong-minded woman, very spiritual."

"I liked her very much," Sylvestre said.

Sylvester said he saw Gabrielle Mee "face-to-face probably five or six times a year ... [and] on the telephone more frequently ... we spoke every two weeks."

In the early 1970s, Sylvestre became aware of the Legion of Christ because a representative of the order visited his parish, Our Lady of Mercy in East Greenwich, R.I., and made a significant impression. But it was Sylvestre's relationship with a Canadian named Fred Hill that eventually brought the Legion of Christ to Gabrielle Mee's attention.

"Fred Hill was a very wealthy individual from Canada that was into major pieces of real estate in Canada and in Texas, I believe," Sylvestre said. Hill, a contributor to the Legion of Christ, contacted Sylvestre for the purpose of getting money from Gabrielle Mee for the benefit of a Catholic charity in the Midwest. The head of the charity was so aggressive in seeking funds that he threatened to show up at a hospital where she was being treated for osteoporosis. Sylvestre threatened to call police, and the conversations about funding ended.

"She was very glad to have me, an insulator, between her and that [Midwest] organization," Sylvestre said.

Hill subsequently raised the possibility to Sylvestre of funding the Legion of Christ.

Sylvestre met with Mee to discuss the Legion and the two agreed to explore the possibility, even though she didn't know much about the order. Sylvestre testified that he asked the Legion for financials, "and they turned on a dime and got me stuff that was concrete, verifiable, audited. The books looked good."

All of this started in "in the late '80s," Sylvestre said. He set up a face-to-face appointment for himself and Gabrielle Mee with the Legion in Connecticut.

About a year later, Mee was invited back to attend a Legion ordination.

Fr. Anthony Bannon, then the Legion's territorial director for North America, was their contact, and he introduced Mee to the Legion's founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

"In the afternoon [of the ordination] we had a meeting with Fr. Maciel and Mrs. Mee, and he had an entourage of probably a half a dozen priests with him and myself. Mrs. Mee had a very productive meeting talking to Fr. Maciel, and she gained a lot of heightened stature from that meeting, as far as I was concerned," Sylvestre said.

At that time, "Mrs. Mee was very competent and alert. I considered her an extremely bright, strong woman," he said.

Like her husband, Mee was a conservative Catholic and the Legion's loyalty to the pope impressed her. "One of the claims that the Legionaries made [was] that they were in lockstep with the pope. At one time the Jesuits were in lockstep with the pope," Sylvestre said.

Eventually, he said, Mee directed him to make gifts to the Legion.

The Legion's methodical cultivation of Mee drew her into Regnum Christi, the order's lay wing. In November 1991, Mee became a consecrated woman within the Legion's corporate organization.

Was she happy at that time?

"She didn't have to tell me she was happy. She was on cloud nine every time I saw her. I saw her, you know, a half dozen times a year after she had joined with the Legionaries and taken up residence, and she was extremely happy," Sylvestre said.

Sylvestre speculated that Timothy Mee would have approved of his wife's donations to the Legion of Christ, though Sylvestre never spoke of the order to him.

Sylvestre retired from Fleet Bank on Jan. 1, 1995, and never had any subsequent involvement with Gabrielle Mee or the Legion of Christ. Sylvestre learned of the serious allegations against Maciel in the early 2000s from reading the local newspaper.

The Legion's lawyer asked Sylvestre if Mee would have stopped giving to the Legion had she known about Maciel's illicit conduct.

Sylvestre was absolutely clear: Mee would have continued to support the Legion of Christ.

He testified that the Legion was an established organization, unlike an earlier religious venture -- a very new outfit that proved to be fraudulent -- to which she had given money and the use of one of her homes. Referring to this earlier association, Sylvestre said, "When there was some misconduct, she blew them out of the water. When she had her association with the Legionaries, she had been with them at some level for a number of years. The misconduct was on the part of one person. The organization that he represented was a huge organization that Mrs. Mee believed in her heart and soul. Because of the seriousness of the leader, one would think, well, this has got to have turned her around. I don't think so. I think that she would have been able to see through that and recognize the fault of the leader, Fr. Maciel, as not being the fault of the organization, and his -- whatever became of him or was to become of him would not affect the organization overall."

Had Mee been subject to undue influence, "I'd actively have gone to Mrs. Mee and tried to rescue her, to be honest with you," Sylvestre said.

While this sounded convincing on its face, Sylvestre then began answering questions by the lawyer for Mee's niece, who is claiming fraud and undue influence by the Legion of Christ on Gabrielle Mee.

The questions presented by the niece's attorney, Bernard Jackvony, raised regular objections from the Legion's lawyer and the lawyer for Sylvestre and Bank of America. Nonetheless, Jackvony presented Sylvestre with numerous trust and trust-related documents of Gabrielle Mee that Sylvestre had signed in the 1980s. Sylvestre studied the documents and repeatedly stated that he could not remember the context or any information related to the documents.

"I visited her when she was with the Legionaries in Wakefield [R.I.], I guess it is. Well, overall, I probably visited her six times a year. How many times did I visit her at the -- I can think of maybe four -- four or five times that I visited with her when she was with the Legionaries in residence," Sylvestre said.

But when it came time to recall major gifts that Gabrielle Mee gave the Legion, Sylvestre's memory failed him.

"It [the Mees' Smithfield, R.I., home] was eventually put in trust for the Legionaries of Christ or handled outright. I don't remember. I think it might have gone in trust at first," Sylvestre said.

Jackvony then asked Sylvestre a series of obvious but necessary questions to better understand the mindset of the very conservative Catholic widow, Mrs. Mee:

Q. And would it be fair to say that she wouldn't condone a priest having a homosexual relationship?

A. I would say that's a fair statement.

Q. Would the same be true of a male priest having sexual conduct or having sexual activity with either minor boys or young seminarians?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you aware that Mrs. Mee had certain feelings about how her monies should be invested at the bank?

A. Yes.

Q. You're aware that she had directed that restrictions be made in terms of the type of companies that the bank could invest in?

A. Yes, I am.

Q. And were those instructions generally along the line that she did not want to be invested in any company that produced or had an activity that was contrary to the doctrines of the Catholic church?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you have an opinion as to how strongly she felt about that?

A. I have an opinion.

Q. What is that opinion?

A. I would say very strong.

Q. And do you have an opinion as to what you think Mrs. Mee would have thought of that?

A. Very, very negatively.

Q. Do you also think that those type of activities by a priest would have not been condoned by Mr. Mee?

A. Would not have been condoned by Mr. Mee.

[Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to *NCR*.]

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