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Cardinal Dziwisz on Maciel: A very limited history

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Pope John Paul II's former secretary, in a recently published book, defends his late boss's promotion of the now-infamous Marciel Maciel Degollado by saying that the pope knew "absolutely nothing" about him because of a lack of communication among the curia.

According to a CNS report by Cindy Wooden, Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, personal secretary to the late John Paul for 39 years, said in his book, *Hi Vissuto con un Santo* (I Lived with a Saint), that the pope should not have met with and praised the founder of the ultra conservative and secretive order, the Legion of Christ, in 2004. "When the Holy Father met him, he knew nothing, absolutely nothing. For him, he [Maciel] was still the founder of a great religious order and that's it. No one had told him anything, not even about the rumors going around." The ignorance, he further explains "was the consequence of a still extremely bureaucratic structure" in which there was little communication.

I have not read the book, which is currently available only in Italian. Perhaps Dziwisz provides more explanation and context in the book, but on the face of the information provided in the CNS story, which gives the impression of a single meeting between the two in 2004, a great deal of history is left out.

The record on Maciel, who, according to the Vatican, abused "more than 20 but fewer than 100" of his former seminarians and who, it was ultimately discovered, had at least three children by two different women, is voluminous. Much of it was generated by journalist Jason Berry for NCR.

But the record extends back to initial stories by Berry and Gerald Renner, then a religion reporter for the Hartford Courant. In February, 1997, the two published an extensively documented story in the Courant, based on on-the-record interviews with nine former seminarians or ex-Legion priests, detailing a history of sexual abuse of seminarians by Maciel. Apparently the news either did not get to the pope or he chose to ignore the allegations.

Maciel refused to be interviewed; the Vatican refused to comment.

Later that same year, John Paul appointed Maciel a special delegate to the Synod for America, a meeting of high-level leaders from North and South America.

Indeed, the nine accusers came forward only after John Paul had characterized Maciel in 1994, a full 10 years before the meeting Dziwisz notes, "as an efficacious guide to youth." That was the line that compelled the nine former victims of Maciel to go public. They didn't want any money at the time, they just wanted John Paul to be aware of their experiences and wanted Maciel to be stopped from abusing other youngsters.

Maciel, as head of religious order with ministries throughout the globe, reported directly to the Vatican and the Vatican alone could order an investigation.

And it was more than "rumors" swirling around during John Paul's papacy. As Berry and Renner reported for NCR in 2001, "the accusers --- seven Mexicans and two Spaniards" tried for many years to reach Pope John Paul II with information on Maciel. Letters by two of the men, sent John Paul in 1978 and again in 1989, both by diplomatic pouch, brought no reply.

Lawyers within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith became convinced of the case against Maciel and began proceedings, but they were abruptly stopped. Maciel, who had spread tens of thousands of dollars around the Vatican apparatus -- including payments directly to Dziwisz for the pope's charitable purposes, payments that allowed donors to gain access to papal functions -- had friends in high places. One of his patrons was former Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano, John Paul's appointment to the second most powerful position in the Vatican.

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Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as head of the CDF and toward the end of John Paul's reign, reopened the investigation. The CDF's chief prosecutor, Msgr. Charles Scicluna (now Archbishop of Malta) traveled to several countries, including the U.S. and Mexico, gathering testimony. Witnesses were also flown into Rome to give testimony.

The evidence, apparently overwhelming, was shown in 2006 to cardinal members of the CDF. Ratzinger, by now Pope Benedict XVI, ordered Maciel banished to a life of penance. Maciel died two years later, in 2008, at age 88.

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