

Former Legion followers criticize oversight of order

Jason Berry | Dec. 27, 2013

Top leaders of Regnum Christi, the lay wing of the Legion of Christ, knew as early as 2006 that Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the scandal-tarnished founder of the order, had a grown daughter, but concealed the information from the members at least three years, *NCR* has learned.

In exclusive *NCR* interviews, Elizabeth Kunze, who spent 16 years as a consecrated celibate in Regnum Christi, and Legionary Fr. Peter Byrne, who is leaving the order, denounced rooted secrecy and betrayal in the order and a bungled Vatican reform effort.

Kunze, of Milwaukee, called Regnum Christi a "cult" and said the Vatican 2010 visitation, or investigation of the Legion, "was rigged."

"I've winced for years every time someone challenged [Regnum Christi], saying it was a cult or cult-like," said Kunze, 47, who works as a bilingual counselor for a Milwaukee Catholic school in a Latino community.

"Even now it is painful for me to consider that description, but a year ago I told someone about the movement" -- as Legionaries and Regnum Christi members call the joint effort -- "and I said quite plainly it was a cult. I feel ashamed for having been caught up in a cult for so many years. It is not easy to admit, but I finally feel free enough to say what I believe."

In a phone interview and emails, Byrne, in Dublin, scoffed at Vatican oversight as the Legion prepares for a Jan. 8 congregational chapter in Rome to elect new leaders.

"People inside the Legion have not been given clear information about what has happened. There is fear to speak openly or to question."

Byrne said he was one of a group of dissident Legionaries, "more than 60 priests who have left the Legion. A lot more, hundreds, were in religious formation and left before reaching the priesthood." Some of the priests ordained last year have already left the order, Byrne believes.

A Legionary for 34 years and ordained in 1991 by Pope John Paul II, Byrne returned disillusioned to Dublin after missionary work in Mexico. "A large group of priests recently celebrated Mass over [Maciel's] tomb," he told *NCR*. "A prominent member has just sent photos of Maciel's crypt adorned with flowers ... his devotion to Maciel. There are also some who still believe there has been a plot against Maciel."

Pope Benedict XVI banished Maciel in 2006 to a life of "prayer and penitence" after a Vatican investigation found that he sexually abused seminarians for many years. When Maciel died in 2008, the Legion stated that he had gone to heaven. A year later, the order disclosed its surprise on learning he had a daughter. Benedict ordered an investigation of the Legion by five bishops from as many countries. In 2011, he appointed Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, a canon lawyer and Roman Curia veteran, as delegate, or papal overseer of the Legion.

"One superior said Benedict signed [the 2006 order] without knowing what he was doing," Byrne said. "I think it caught the superiors off-guard. They went back to the old default -- this is a persecution. I was uncomfortable with that, but had to believe my superiors, who were telling us this was a saintly man, called to his last trial in a long life of trials. That's the story we got. I bought into it. But when news of the daughter came out, the whole thing fell apart for me."

Kunze told *NCR* that a 19-year-old woman staying with Regnum Christi in Rome raised eyebrows by sitting on Maciel's lap during an event celebrating his 60th anniversary as a priest in late 2004. Years later, they learned that woman was Maciel's daughter. Cardinal Franc Rodé, who oversaw the Vatican congregation for religious, learned from a Legion priest of the daughter's existence, and saw a videotape of her with Maciel, as *NCR* reported in early 2013. Rodé said he persuaded Maciel to retire as director general at 84.

Kunze's revelations and Byrne's criticism raise doubts about the reform under De Paolis, who drafted new constitutions for the order.

Benedict revoked the Legion's private promises, or vows by which all members pledged to never speak ill of Maciel or other Legion superiors and to expose internal critics. The vows rewarded spying as an expression of faith in a climate of secrecy that for decades allowed Maciel to shield himself from scrutiny. He molested dozens of seminarians and had at least three biological children by two women.

"De Paolis doesn't speak Spanish, has not lived with the communities, was only a few days in Mexico [where the order is very strong and the most devoted followers of Maciel still prominent], he didn't meet with victims and he allowed the men who were close to Maciel to continue governing," Byrne told *NCR*. "I think he never grasped the degree of corruption inherited from Maciel."

De Paolis, in a Dec. 14 sermon in Rome when he ordained 31 men as Legionary priests, praised them for a three-year "path of penance and of purification. ... You have been able to listen to the many accusations that have come from all sides. You have examined them. You have seen whether they were true or not. And you have admitted the truth, and tried to correct what was wrong. You have suffered, and you have realized the suffering that other Legionaries -- beginning with the founder -- have caused in the lives of others. And the suffering of others has helped you to understand and carry your own suffering. You have experienced the peace that suffering brings."

The cardinal also told the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, "The vast majority of the Legion's priests battled on and did not lose their spirits, showing perseverance in their vocation ? [and] will now give [Pope] Francis and the church a strong and dynamic body, boosted by the growing role of Regnum Christi."

That rosy prognosis sits poorly with Byrne and Kunze, who see the Vatican handling of the Legion as a continuation of the soft-glove approach it took to Maciel, who was trailed by abuse accusations for decades.

"After four years we still do not know who was responsible" for assisting Maciel's double life, Byrne said in a letter on the website www.life-after-rc.com [1].

The Vatican has made no accounting "for the use of Legionary school funds to pay for the expenses of Fr. Maciel's wives and families," Byrne charged. "Bribes were paid; gifts were given. The names of ecclesiastic figures and important families were kept on lists and their 'cultivation' was reviewed in meetings with the results, plans and objectives kept in databases. The Vatican was lied to [about] the situation of the congregation."

Kunze learned about the Legion's deception in several phases.

At Maciel's 60th anniversary event, "one of these big gatherings at the Irish Institute [a prep school] in Rome, we sat on folding chairs for questions and answers with Maciel." She was visiting from Vienna, where she lived in a Regnum Christi community. The school on Via Giustiniana in Rome, far from the main Legion complex on Via Aurelia, is part of the Legion's International Center. Co-workers are young members yet to take vows.

"This young co-worker wanted to sing a serenade. She was dancing very suggestively, and sat on Maciel's knees and caressed his face. It was so inappropriate. We were speechless. ... It was just bizarre, and then to find out years later it was his daughter -- it looked incestuous."

The Regnum Christi superior in Rome, Malen Oriol, "was upset," Kunze said.

"But *Nuestro Padre* ['Our Father,' as Maciel was called] made a gesture to Malen as if to say, 'No, it's fine -- I'll take on this humiliation for this young girl.' ... They shooed her out of the auditorium like a little delinquent girl. I was shocked that no one said anything."

Kunze said, "She lived with the consecrated women in Rome, as a volunteer with the young women's section. I think her time was cut short."

Maciel's daughter, Norma Hilda Rivas Baños, known as Normita, was in Rome as part of a Regnum Christi community, Jim Fair, the North American Legion spokesman, said in an email response to questions. "The RC community at La Giustiniana had a 'pensione' and I was able to confirm that the daughter stayed there for a few days and was chaperoned to some events," Fair said after contacting Legion officials.

"She wasn't part of the community and just one of the people staying at 'the inn.' One and all were oblivious to her 'real' identity. She was just another girl. The festivities included NO dances."

El Mundo, a Madrid daily, reported in 2010 that the girl's mother, Norma Hilda Baños, said her daughter "was abused by her father, Maciel. She suffers from severe trauma from her childhood and I don't believe she is ever going to get over it."

Beyond those few words, neither woman has spoken publicly about Maciel. When he left Rome in 2006, disgraced by Benedict's banishment, Maciel flew to his Mexican birthplace, Cotija de la Paz, a major Legion center, and reunited with Norma and Normita. Photographs of them with Maciel were later published in *Quien*, a Mexican gossip magazine. The women were also in Jacksonville, Fla., during Maciel's final months and at his death.

Maciel created Regnum Christi in Mexico in the 1970s as a means of recruiting children and wives of wealthy families to boost fundraising and help staff the Legion's elite private schools with volunteer labor.

Kunze's and Byrne's criticism of internal dynamics of the Legion has a sonorous echo in two lawsuits the Legion faces in Rhode Island, where the order is accused of fraud and deception in bilking two elderly Regnum Christi members out of millions of dollars.

In 2008, as 96-year-old Gabrielle Mee was dying in a Rhode Island hospital, Legionary Fr. Anthony Bannon, who held her power of attorney, arranged for Fleet Bank to move \$400,000 from her personal account to the Legion account. The 2009 lawsuit filed by Mee's niece, Mary Lou Dauray, seeks the return of \$30 million from the Legion, alleging that the widow was defrauded.

In February, a Rhode Island appeals court upheld Superior Court Judge Michael Silverstein's decision to revoke a protective order the Legionaries had secured in the Mee case. Silverstein referred to the order's "clandestinely

dubious spiritual leaders."

In the second Rhode Island case, filed in federal court in September, Paul Chu charges that the Legion duped his elderly father, James Boa-Teh Chu, out of \$1 million "in pensions and related assets." The late Boa-Teh Chu, an émigré from China, was a retired Yale professor. In May 2008 -- two months after Maciel's death, and the same month Mee died -- Chu's "health and mental capacity was declining ... [when] emissaries of the Legionaries of Christ began to coerce [him] into changing beneficiaries on his TIAA-CREFF and related accounts ... At no time did the [Legion] advise [Chu] or his known Executor or his family as to the change."

The lawsuit filed by attorney John Flanagan alleges that the Legion used "predatory means ... to subvert [Chu's] estate plan" by using "coercive fundraising tactics, inducing elderly donors to leave exorbitant sums of inheritance to Defendants, by deceitful tactics, gives rise to Elderly Abuse, taking monies under false pretenses, fraud, conversion, concealment of facts and misrepresentation of [Chu's] spiritual advisor." The complaint calls the tactics "criminal misconduct advanced to fleece [Chu's] Estate."

As Chu "was being solicited and consecrated as laity to the Legionaries, the Order was being investigated by the Roman Catholic church hierarchy in Rome for grave improprieties. ... Legionaries dispatched their agents to seek inappropriate financial disclosures of the assets of [Chu], including obtaining a power of attorney used to pillage [his] portfolio and related accounts."

The Legion obtained protective orders in both cases, restricting lawyers and plaintiffs from speaking out. Last year, however, Silverstein released voluminous documents in the Mee case, at the request of *NCR*, The Associated Press, *The New York Times* and the *Providence Journal* (*NCR*, March 1-14, 2013). The Mee case is in appeal over whether the niece has legal standing as a plaintiff.

There has been no criminal investigation in Rhode Island as the civil cases grind away.

Since leaving Regnum Christi, Kunze has lived with her mother, Mary Kunze, a bioethicist who does palliative care work, in the family home outside Milwaukee where Elizabeth Kunze grew up in a conservative family of four children. Her second-oldest brother, Christopher, a Marquette University graduate, was ordained a Legion priest in 1994. The family traveled to Mexico City for the ordination. Christopher Kunze advanced within the order. Thanks to his fluency in German and Maciel's influence with Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos, prefect of Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, he became an undersecretary there.

Elizabeth Kunze graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1987 and worked several years in retail marketing. Influenced by Christopher's zeal as a Legionary, she left a job with Neiman Marcus to join Regnum Christi in 1996. By then, Maciel had made sexual advances on her brother, which he rebuffed; in frustration and conflict over the private vows, he resigned his Vatican job and left the Legion in 2000. He had read press accounts of the abuse allegations against Maciel on his computer at the Congregation for the Clergy. Legionaries, living in community, had restricted search engine access and were forbidden to discuss the allegations.

After returning to America, he married and had two children while building a business career. For years he pleaded with Elizabeth to leave Regnum Christi. So did her twin sister, an older brother and Mary Kunze, who is long divorced from the siblings' father.

Like all Regnum Christi and Legion members, Elizabeth Kunze abided by the vow never to criticize Maciel. Reading Maciel's letters in groups animated the Legion view of a corrupt world at odds with movement sanctity and rectitude. Barred from frequent family contact, she -- like Byrne until 2009 -- in her sporadic communication with relatives defended Maciel as falsely accused, a future saint.

Christopher and Mary Kunze are prominent interviewees in "Vows of Silence," this writer's 2008 documentary based on the book with Gerald Renner. The documentary ends with Mary Kunze saying, "I just want my daughter back."

Elizabeth's return was a slow process of excavating fact from fiction.

Her decision to leave came well after Regnum Christi superiors knew about Maciel's daughter and Benedict had banished him from ministry in 2006.

Oriol, the Regnum Christi leader in Rome, worked closely with Legion superiors who ran the order under Maciel. The Oriols are one of Spain's wealthiest families and gave millions to the Legion. Four of Oriol's brothers became Legion priests.

The news of Maciel's daughter hit Kunze like a thunderbolt.

She saw the 2008 post on the Legion website that Maciel had gone to heaven. "I started thinking it strange that we didn't have more direct communications. The funeral was private and quick. That seemed fishy to me. Rumors began going around. Right before Christmas, Fr. Luis Garza [the vicar general] had a question-answer session with consecrated women in Rome. He told us Fr. Maciel suffered from dementia and that he fathered at least one child. ... It was a huge wrench to start thinking he'd done these things. We were so intent on living our private promises -- you never say anything bad about the founder. It was so ingrained."

She continued, "I began to realize they were not telling all of us the same story. The information one got depended upon what one asked. We were encouraged only to talk about the founder with our directors in private -- respecting our private promises. I felt annoyed that there were no open statements or letter from the director general stating the facts plainly. But I did not feel free to ask or to show disapproval."

Her denial began unraveling in a long 2011 phone call with Oriol, the Regnum Christi superior whom she admired enormously. Kunze was in Dublin, teaching at a Legion school soon to close. Pressing for answers no one else would give, she heard the emotions hit Oriol, who was in her 50s and had spent her adult life as a consecrated woman. "She told me stories about her own experience ... how she took care of the founder in his last months with another consecrated woman" in a Jacksonville gated-community apartment the Legion bought for Maciel's life of penitence. Garza, Norma and Normita were in the close circle in Maciel's final days.

"I finally felt, here is someone who is suffering like I am," Kunze said. But she also felt waves of anger. "And when I told her, I couldn't stop crying about how upset I felt, so disappointed, so lied to and deceived." In that traumatic meeting, said Kunze, she realized that Oriol had known about Normita since 2006 but "had to decide how to present it to us" -- breaking the private promises all the women lived by. "She was a very wise woman but no one prepared her for that task. The weight was on her shoulders, catching the flak, phone calls, then meetings over the next year and a half." Despite the betrayal, Kunze said, "I think so highly of her -- all the suffering she and her brothers went through, after their family gave so much in properties and financial gifts."

Oriol traveled to the various Regnum Christi houses in Europe and Mexico, telling the women the truth about Maciel. She left Regnum Christi in early 2012, after her four priest-brothers left the Legion.

Kunze left in spring 2011.

The pivotal moment for her came at a park in Dublin, seated with her niece from Chicago, a student at Trinity College that semester. The girl had a nose ring, which Kunze could not understand, and in not understanding she became curious. As they spoke, she realized she had missed most of her niece's life during years when her

mother and siblings pleaded with her to come home.

"Dad says he'll send an airline ticket whenever you want it," the niece said. A few days later she flew home.

[Jason Berry, author of *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, writes from New Orleans.]

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