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Ex-Legionary: Curial overseer neglects investigation of inner culture

by Jason Berry

Under the dictatorial personality of Legion of Christ founder Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, and during the decades of allegations that he abused his own seminarians, four Irish priests, now in their 60s and 70s, were among his closest confidantes. The four priests wooed wealthy donors, carried out Maciel's orders and put out fires when troubles flared.

Irish Frs. Anthony Bannon, Owen Kearns, Raymond Cosgrave and John Devlin became powerful men in the order Maciel founded in Mexico.

Bannon was the chief fundraiser in America.

Kearns led the media attack against Maciel's pedophilia victims.

Devlin was Maciel's secretary for decades, a keeper of the secrets for whom no detail was too small, according to former Legion insiders.

Cosgrave was Maciel's point man in establishing the Legion in Chile during the 1973-90 dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

These clerics bolstered Maciel's defenses, according to ex-Legionaries critical of the Vatican for helping the order rebuild since its 2009 revelations that Maciel, in addition to abusing young seminarians, had three children by two women.

The four priests remain important for what they knew of the operation of the Legion and for the influence they continued to exert on the order following Maciel's death in 2008 and the decision the next year to

place the order under Vatican control.

According to published reports, Kearns and Bannon were members of a committee drafting a new constitution for the order.

Cosgrave, who was used by Maciel at times as a kind of troubleshooter in different locations, remains a superior in Chile. He was, according to sources who spoke to *NCR* on background, charming with big donors. His job in Chile was to make sure the Legion paid for itself and to cement ties with Archbishop Angelo Sodano, the papal nuncio and a supporter of Pinochet. Sodano later would become cardinal secretary of state under Pope John Paul II and one of the staunchest supporters of Maciel in Vatican circles.

Behind the checkered careers of the four priests lie larger questions about the Legion operations.

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How did Maciel find the millions it took to support two families, while traveling between Rome, New England and Mexico City for decades?

How long did his inner circle know about his secret life as they cultivated donors to maintain the order's \$650 million annual budget?

Have the patterns of duplicity that caused the Legion's continuing scandals suddenly evaporated?

A surreal Legion backstory is surfacing as Vatican officials, heedless of warnings by ex-Legionaries, are positioning Pope Francis to take responsibility for the shaky Legion ship. It is the pope who will have to approve the new constitution as well as the newly elected leaders of the order. He will also have to decide whether the Legion needs continued oversight.

A culture of lies

Maciel created a culture of mendacity, structural lying, to protect himself -- a culture that permeated the Legion, took on its own afterlife following his death and is still vibrant in the order.

Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, the canon lawyer Pope Benedict XVI appointed in 2010 as delegate, or overseer of the order, has avoided a direct confrontation with the inner culture, according to ex-Legionaries.

At a Mass Jan. 8 for the Legion, De Paolis said that the canonical revisions "should be accompanied by a process of examination of life ... and of spiritual renewal," according to Vatican News Service, including "a common mission, a common path to healing."

How such sentiments square with ongoing realities in the Legion is unknown. For instance, two Rhode Island lawsuits, in which Bannon is a central figure, allege that the Legion defrauded elderly benefactors. Those cases, and interviews with past and present Legion insiders, open a viewfinder on the Irish priests' role as enablers of Maciel's designs.

One of the Legionaries who has left the order and is now speaking out is also Irish. Fr. Peter Byrne, who spoke to *NCR* from his home in Dublin in a long telephone interview, says he is among 61 Legionaries who recently left.

He told *NCR* that a group of Legion reformers tried to persuade De Paolis to do a serious investigation, but got nowhere. Next they appealed to then-Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who also rebuffed them, according to Byrne.

De Paolis, 78, will soon step down. Bertone has retired as secretary of state after a transitional period serving Francis.

"We tried going through channels," Byrne told *NCR*. "A lot of these men were moderate and spoke to Cardinal De Paolis. We signed a letter asking for a thorough investigation but De Paolis never permitted that.

"We petitioned him to set up a commission of truth and reconciliation, but these things never happened," he continued. "We asked that a group of Legionaries be given psychologists to help them through this period with external spiritual directors. We knew this was going to be very difficult. We never got that either. ... We sent letters to Cardinal Bertone. Several members of our group spoke to Bertone personally. But superiors were left in place. We tried to challenge the culture of the Legion that had been shaped by Maciel."

Byrne criticized Frs. Luis Garza, former vicar general, and Alvaro Corcuera, who succeeded Maciel in 2004 as general director, for blocking internal reform.

"These men were around Maciel when he died, when the Vatican gave clear instruction for 'prayer and penitence,'" Byrne said in reference to Maciel's bizarre final days in an upscale Jacksonville, Fla., home the order had purchased. Devlin, his longtime Irish secretary, was there. So was Maciel's 23-year-old daughter, Normita, and her mother, Norma Hilda Baños, visiting from the home in Madrid that Maciel had bought for them. Consecrated women from the Regnum Christi lay group, Garza and Corcuera (scions of prominent Mexican families), and several other Legionaries rounded out the unusual mix attending Maciel as he was dying.

The Legion's secrets

"John Devlin was absolutely close to Maciel," Paul Lennon, a family therapist in Alexandria, Va., and former Legion priest, told *NCR*.

"John and I entered in Dublin the same year, 1961. He loved clerical work and was with Maciel through the '70s, '80s and '90s as his personal secretary. He managed his agenda and appointments with bishops, benefactors, his correspondence and his trips. He was one of Maciel's right-hand men. He would do anything for Maciel."

Lennon left in 1985, while a missionary in Mexico, after a fiery confrontation with Maciel over his punishment of men who questioned orders, and his policy of forbidding Legionaries to speak of anyone who left the order. Maciel denounced them as traitors. Few Legionaries realized that some who had left were victims of Maciel's sexual abuse.

Devlin was in Jacksonville because he was supposed to be close to Maciel, come what may. But it was Garza, the Mexican vicar general, who ended up getting demoted, according to Byrne.

"De Paolis took Garza from vicar general and made him territorial director in the U.S. -- a very strange move," Byrne told *NCR*.

"Garza was the financial brain and some of us had the opinion that he could not be removed. He had the keys, the numbers to the combination, as one priest put it. We were told the priests in America asked for him as territorial director, but that's as probable as Ireland winning the World Cup.

"Why didn't De Paolis just get rid of him? Obviously, De Paolis was frustrated but not enough to send him back into community life."

Nicholas Cafardi, a canonist and dean emeritus of the Duquesne University School of Law in Pittsburgh, has known De Paolis by his work on church legal issues in Rome. A member of the 2002 National Review Board named by the U.S. bishops to provide recommendations on the abuse crisis, Cafardi told *NCR* that De Paolis worked to fulfill Benedict's mandate of paying compensation to Maciel's victims.

"I know from other sources that the Legion of Christ payouts averaged between 30,000 and 50,000 euros," said Cafardi, meaning about \$42,000 to \$70,000. Lawyers litigating for clergy victims in America and countries with a base in English common law often secure six- and seven-figure settlements; most of the Maciel victims live in Spain and Mexico, where statutes of limitations had expired and cases pay far less.

Wooing wealthy widows

As Maciel built the Legion financial base by cultivating wealthy widows and important benefactors in Mexico in the 1950s and '60s, Bannon emulated *Nuestro Padre* -- as order members called Maciel -- by securing Gabrielle Mee's largess for the Legion expansion in New York, as shown by documents released in litigation in Rhode Island. The lawsuit seeks \$30 million from the Legion for allegedly using a shield of secrecy about Maciel. Mee died a few months after Maciel in 2008, clueless that the Vatican had banished him from ministry in 2006.

Bannon held Mee's power of attorney and moved \$400,000 from her personal account to a Legion account as the 96-year-old was dying.

Even as Bannon was forced to testify in Rhode Island, he served on De Paolis' committee to rewrite the Legion bylaws.

"I and others strongly objected to Bannon and other veteran Legionaries being on that commission because of their proximity to Maciel," Lennon told *NCR*.

Bannon figures in a second Rhode Island lawsuit, brought by the son of James Boa-Teh Chu, a retired college professor and Regnum Christi member, who died shortly after Mee. The lawsuit charges that the Legionaries' visits to him were a "complete dereliction of their duties and fiduciary obligations as spiritual advisor."

The Legion courted Chu "not to provide pastoral care or spiritual wellness but for the beneficial interest of the Legion of Christ ... and their interrelated entities carrying out its illicit fundraising activities," attorney John Flanagan alleged. "Legion donations and monies are channeled throughout the

organizations controlled by the Legion, including a foreign Mexican entity known as Grupo Integer."

Grupo Integer was created by Maciel, Garza and others as a holding company within the order, which had a \$650 million budget in 2006.

American law gives "religious charities" tax exemption; the precise role of Grupo Integer is the financial mystery at the core of the Legion.

The Legion is legally a religious charity. In the Mee case, her attorney argues the Legion is criminally liable for predatory behavior toward Mee.

Attacking the accusers

Kearns, also an ultraloyalist to Maciel, traveled with Bannon on fundraising missions, working as a team. Kearns' more strategic role was in the media as a front man, along with Fr. Thomas Williams, in a campaign to discredit the ex-Legionaries who charged Maciel with abusing them as seminarians. Williams has since married the daughter of former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Mary Ann Glendon, Elizabeth Lev, nine years after they had a child. The case seeking Maciel's excommunication was filed in 1998 in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's tribunal. Glendon, in 2002, scoffed at the accusations; unlike her son-in-law, she has made no apology for defending Maciel.

Kearns used a special website, LegionaryFacts.org, published in 1997, to mount an attack on Maciel's accusers. In subsequent years, as editor of the weekly *National Catholic Register*, Kearns continued to attack the eight victims who, as adults and former Legion members, first publicly accused Maciel of sexual abusing them. Kearns accused them of fomenting a conspiracy against Maciel after they filed their 1998 grievance at the Vatican. LegionaryFacts was taken off the Web in 2006, when Maciel was banished from ministry.

Kearns singled out Juan Vaca -- whose abuse by Maciel began at age 12 at a seminary in Spain, and in 1976 filed accusations against Maciel at the Vatican -- as "a proud, status-conscious man angered and disappointed by his professional failures."

Kearns accused Vaca of wanting "greater power in the Legion" despite Vaca's resignation in 1976 and letter to Maciel cataloguing the sexual abuses to him and 20 others.

The disinformation campaign against the Legion's would-be enemies did not stop in 2006, however.

Under the loose control of a sympathetic De Paolis, the Legion struggled to regroup in a balkanized internal culture -- some men loyal to Maciel as a victim of the Vatican; others seeking a purification of truth; vested Legionaries scrambling to defend themselves and fuel the money-making machine; younger Legionaries attracted to the order's ultraorthodox image.

"This is a damage control operation," Vaca, now a psychology professor at Mercy College, New York, said of the general chapter underway in Rome.

Born in 1937 in Mexico, Vaca left the Legion in 1976, joining the Rockville Centre, N.Y., diocese. He left the priesthood a decade later.

"The election of new superiors and promulgation of a new constitution won't change the internalized corruption," said Vaca, who singled out the four Irish Legionaries by name as symptomatic of the problem.

In his homily for the Legionaries beginning their general chapter Jan. 8, De Paolis said his primary duty was "to preserve and promote the [order's] charism ... in the spirit of the Gospel and in fidelity to the norms of the church."

"The Legionaries as an order don't have a charism," responded Vaca.

"They are trying to define themselves with generalities, such as fidelity to the pope. Maciel defined the charism as working with 'the elite of society.' That doesn't come from God. It came from a man with overlapping sexual pathologies and severe personality disorders. I won't be surprised if they come up with some new definition of their charism, but we should not forget that charism is considered a grace from God.

"Those who are maintaining the same institutionalized corruption of this cult-like organization learned it from Maciel," said Vaca, whose account of Maciel's abuse sent to the Vatican in 1976, 1978, and 1989, made him a key witness in the 2004 investigation ordered by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

"They pretend everything in the Legion is business as usual," Vaca said. "The present superiors, including Cardinal De Paolis, are trying to save the sinking boat."

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[Jason Berry, author of *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, writes from New Orleans. The Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute assisted with research for this article.]

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