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Legionaries to critics: 'Give us a chance'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 22, 2014 NCR Today
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As the Legionaries of Christ ponder new leadership and a new constitution amid what is arguably among the deepest crises any Catholic religious order has ever faced, priests taking part in a keenly anticipated general chapter meeting in Rome have a two-pronged message for those skeptical that change is possible.

First, they say, there are no guarantees; and second, give us a chance.

As if one were needed, participants in the general chapter got a reminder Wednesday of just how hard it may be to regain trust after more than a decade of denying charges of sexual abuse and misconduct against their founder, the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, only to have to acknowledge them in 2009.

In a piece published Wednesday by the *National Catholic Reporter* [1], Juan Vaca, one of Maciel's original accusers who says his abuse began at age 12, dismissed the general chapter as "a damage control operation."

"The election of new superiors and promulgation of a new constitution won't change the internalized corruption," said Vaca, now a psychology professor in New York.

Asked what he would say to such critics, Legionary Fr. John Bartunek, a Cleveland native who now lives in Rome, said they're asking the Legionaries "a better question than we sometimes realize."

Bluntly, he said, "I can't give any guarantees." What he would ask, he said, is patience.

"I would say to those critics that I believe we're sincere in wanting to change, so please give us a chance," he said. "We're going to get better, but be patient."

Bartunek and two other American Legionaries taking part in the general chapter, which began Jan. 8, sat down with *NCR* on Wednesday at the order's Rome headquarters.

On Monday, the order posted a Web announcement that the general chapter had entered the election process to choose a new superior, called a general director, and other clergy to serve on the order's general council.

The results are not official until Pope Francis signs off.

The order has essentially been under papal receivership since 2010, when Benedict XVI appointed a delegate in the person of Italian Cardinal Velasio De Paolis to lead a cleanup operation.

All three Legionaries who spoke to *NCR* emphasized the importance of finding a leader who represents a break with Maciel.

"We have men who are very capable of governing who weren't associated with the founder, and we needed to show that," said Fr. John Connor, who grew up in Maryland and now lives in New York.

"For me, nonassociation with the founder is a very important issue," Connor said.

Fr. David Daly, a native of St. Louis who currently serves as superior of a Legionary community in Atlanta, said the same conviction is broadly shared among priests taking part in the chapter.

"Most everyone is aware that's an important part of our selection," he said.

Evolution already underway

The Legionaries insisted that the order already has evolved considerably, away from perceptions of secrecy, excessive control, and an unseemly appetite for money and power.

Bartunek, for instance, pointed to a new way of dealing with authority.

"It was too centralized, too much command-and-control," he said.

"There wasn't a lot of participation in decisions, and there was too much passing the buck up and up. Local superiors were just kind of middle men, passing even little decisions up and then everything came down from on high."

Today, he said, things are different.

"Each superior now has councils that are actually functioning, at least more than they were," Bartunek said.

"There also has been a change in superiors, because we used to have superiors that would stay in office for years and years. There's a lot more consultation, such as talking with a guy you're going to move [to ask], 'What do you think? How do you feel?' "

Bartunek also said the internal climate has loosened up.

"In the past we valued charity a lot, but we had a limited understanding of it," he said.

"We thought it meant you can never really differ, but now we have a lot more discussion. Culturally, we're learning that you can still love one another when you disagree."

Connor said there's a new commitment to transparency, citing Dec. 5 letters from Legion officials acknowledging the validity of sex abuse allegations against a former novice instructor, Fr. William Izquierdo, and outlining steps the order has taken to combat the problem.

"That was a pretty significant change in communication," Connor said. "I would hope people see that."

A new charism

Trying to identify a mission for the Legion post-Maciel, the priests said, known in the argot of religious orders as a "charism," is one of the chapter's primary challenges.

Though each phrased it slightly different, all agreed that the charism of the new Legion will be based on missionary drive.

Daly phrased it this way: "helping people be active apostles in the new evangelization."

The priests expressed gratitude for signals from the Vatican that it wants the order to survive, such as the fact that in addition to De Paolis, the Vatican commissioned one of the church's best-regarded canon lawyers, Jesuit Fr. Gianfranco Ghirlanda, to advise them during the general chapter.

Recently, American canon lawyer Edward Peters called for the Legion to be put out of business, asserting that "the Catholic church has zero tradition of institutes of perfection being founded ... by predatory charlatans." Bartunek said it was consoling to hear De Paolis and Ghirlanda say that's not quite true.

"It's pretty clear we're not the only ones," he said, "because both of them said they've dealt with other cases."

(Though he said De Paolis and Ghirlanda did not cite specifics, one instance they may have had in mind concerns the founder of an Italian order known as the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Fr. Gino Burresi, who was removed and barred from public ministry by Benedict XVI in May 2005 facing charges of sexual abuse of seminarians. In retrospect, it seemed a harbinger of the pope's move against Maciel a year later, and today the Servants are still a going concern.)

The Legionaries voiced a basic confidence that the order will survive.

"If these kinds of challenges don't break you, they make you," Connor said.

"I think the Legion is going to endure for many years, primarily because I see our men stronger," he said. "Among those who stayed, there's a commitment and a passion that's creating a very strong foundation for the future."

That doesn't mean, however, the internal struggles are at an end.

Connor, for instance, said the general chapter is committed to upholding a 3-year-old policy that Maciel will no longer be referred to (in Spanish) as "our father," that pictures of him will be removed from Legionary facilities, and that his writings won't be used in formation programs.

"We all understand that he can't be a model of Christian life, religious life or Legionary life," he said.

Yet Bartunek said there are some Legionaries not ready to completely cancel Maciel from memory.

"A lot of the fathers fed their hunger for spiritual reading with the writings of the founder," he said. "Today a lot of these guys are doing great work and are spiritually mature priests, and they ask, 'How can we say it's all trash?' "

No lurch to the left

Although the Legionaries have a reputation for being on the conservative side of most Catholic debates, the priests said they're mostly enthused about the new winds blowing under Francis.

They also said Francis' dedication to simplicity is having an impact, including on the very practical level of thinking about where to hold events so they don't appear overly sumptuous and so on.

"When we read that he talked about what kind of car a priest should drive, every single one of us was checking out our car to see where we're at," Daly said.

That said, observers probably shouldn't expect a sharp lurch to the left.

"It's common among us Legionaries that we try to be in step with the church, and we look to the current magisterium as a reference point for that," Daly said.

Asked about Catholics who would say being in step with the church is not always the same thing as being in step with its formal authorities, Daly's reply was succinct: "For us it is, and I think it will continue."

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