

# Mahony Better Watch Out for Legion of Christ

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**By Jason Berry**

New Orleans -- The Los Angeles archdiocese faces about 500 civil cases stemming from alleged priestly sexual abuse and a grand jury seeking voluminous personnel files on accused clerics. And it may be courting another problem. The Legion of Christ, a Catholic order of priests whose leader has been trailed by accusations of sexual abuse and whose schools have attracted controversy, is seeking to open a prep school in Ventura County.

The Legion derides the allegations against founder Father Marcial Maciel Degollado as "disproved." But sexual-abuse accusations by nine former Legionaries have never been adjudicated by the Vatican.

The charges against Maciel first arose in 1976, when a Mexican priest and a Spanish priest gave the late Bishop John McGann detailed accounts of alleged abuse when they were teenage seminarians in Spain and Rome, where Maciel founded schools in the 1940s and 1950s. In compliance with canon law, McGann sent a dossier of the charges to Rome.

The Vatican acknowledged receiving the allegations, and did nothing. McGann continued to push the priests' cause, in 1978 and 1989, but again met with silence from the Vatican. In the 1990s, seven other former Legionaries made similar sexual-abuse charges against Maciel. The Vatican remained silent.

Throughout, Maciel, now 84, has maintained his innocence.

In 1998, the papal ambassador to Mexico encouraged the group of ex-Legionaries to take their charges to Rome. The canonical case, filed at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, accused Maciel of "absolving the sins" of his victims in confession. Under church law, profaning the confessional is a crime with no statute of limitation.

In late 1999, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who oversees the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, halted the proceeding without explanation.

The Legion portrays Maciel as a victim of false accusations. It cites a Vatican investigation of drug abuse charges against Maciel in the 1950s.

The priest was reinstated after the investigation. But as public allegations against Maciel mounted, the Vatican never proclaimed his innocence. By contrast, the Vatican publicly supported Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin when he was accused, in 1993, of sexual

abuse in a civil lawsuit. The suit was dropped when the plaintiff said he could no longer trust his memory.

Ratzinger's handling of the Maciel case suggests a double standard. An American priest accused of abuse by nine former students would be removed from ministry under the bishops' 2002 youth protection charter, which stressed "zero tolerance." Maciel lives at the Legion seminary in Rome and hosts dinners for Vatican luminaries.

Prep schools were central to Maciel's strategy in establishing the Legion in Mexico in 1941. He courted wealthy backers in Latin America and Spain. Seminarians also cultivated potential donors and participated in fundraising drives, a departure from seminarian practices in such Catholic orders as the Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans.

Legion members take vows never to speak ill of Maciel or their superiors and to report any member who does -- vows that reward spying as an expression of faith.

Accordingly, a mind-set of secrecy and sequestered loyalties permeates the Legion.

Maciel's photograph hangs on the walls in Legion schools. Students revere him as a hero from the days of Mexico's anti-clerical persecutions. But Maciel was kicked out of two seminaries as a young man.

No others would take him, which the official Legion history chalks up to "misunderstandings." Were it not for an uncle (a bishop who had him privately tutored), Maciel would never have become a priest.

The Legion's two dozen U.S. prep schools are mostly in affluent suburbs and function largely outside diocesan school systems. The schools are entwined with Regnum Christi, a lay group that studies the writings of Maciel and conducts extensive fundraising. Members call themselves "the Movement."

The schools have had their share of controversy. In Atlanta, the archdiocese sold the Donnellan School (named after a former archbishop) to the Legion. A principal and three staffers were soon fired for "mutinous actions." One of them, a guidance counselor, had refused to give a priest information that children had shared with her in a therapeutic setting. The former principal, Angela Naples, had been sent to Rome for Regnum Christi training, which she found coercive. "You cannot shove things down people's throats," she said. The Movement leaders "spoke of Maciel like he was right up there with the pope."

Naples and the three others sued, settling for a total of \$375,000.

In Naples, Fla., police Det. Sgt. Dan Anderson became president of the parents club at the start-up Legion school. The parents soon clashed with Regnum Christi. "They saw blind faith, untiring devotion to the Movement, secret meetings ... and [parents] did not like it," said Anderson, who removed his four children from the school. Parents researched

Maciel on the Internet and connected with people in other communities who felt burned by the Regum Christi.

The Legion has its powerful clerical supporters. Sacramento Bishop William Weigand supports a Legion plan to found a university in his diocese. Atlanta's Archbishop John Donoghue, to the dismay of some of his priests, has given the Legion and Regnum Christi near carte blanche to teach catechism to Catholic kids who don't attend parochial schools.

Given the controversy associated with its founder and the history of parental unhappiness with its schools, why would Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony be receptive to the Legion of Christ? An archdiocesan spokesman called the situation "a state of preliminary conversations."

But Mahony would do well to emulate Bishop James Griffin of Columbus, Ohio.

In 2002, at a parish school there, conflict arose after Regnum Christi members arranged the hiring of a new principal. Four teachers soon resigned. Parents charged that teenagers who avoided certain extracurricular activities were denied confirmation. Complaints mounted about secret meetings. One parent likened the Movement to a cult.

Griffin, who has degrees in canon and civil law, made what is called "an extraordinary visitation" to the parish and listened to all sides in the dispute. Three weeks later, he publicly banned Regnum Christi from parish property and the Legion of Christ from any role in his diocese.

Jason Berry has published six books. His most recent, with Gerald Renner, is "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II."