

Catholic Leader Steps Down

Founder Of Order Under Vatican Probe

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The Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the subject of a Vatican investigation into accusations of sexual abuse, has stepped down as head of the Rome-based religious order Legionaries of Christ.

Maciel declined to accept re-election as general director of the order, which he founded in Mexico in 1941. The order's U.S. headquarters is in Orange, Conn., and it has a seminary in Cheshire.

Maciel, 84, cited his age and his "desire to see the congregation flourish under a successor" at a meeting of his order in Rome last week, according to Zenit, an Internet news service operated by the Legionaries.

No mention was made of the Vatican's recent reopening of an investigation into charges that Maciel had sexually abused young boys who were in his seminaries years ago. The allegations first surfaced in a Courant report in February 1997. Nine former members of the Legion said that Maciel had abused them when they were young boys or teenagers, aged 10 to 16, in seminaries in Spain and Italy.

Maciel's decision to decline re-election had no connection to the reports that the Vatican has reopened the investigation, a spokesman for the order told The Associated Press in Rome on Monday.

Maciel and the order have vigorously denied the allegations, accusing the nine men of a conspiracy to defame him.

"He had been planning this for at least three years," said the spokesman, the Rev. Tom Williams.

The order's general chapter meets every 12 years. The election was held Thursday in Rome, with the announcement of the leadership change made Sunday. The Rev. Alvaro Corcuera, 47, a Mexican, was elected to succeed Maciel after leaders of the order "first re-elected Father Maciel by absolute majority vote" but he declined to accept, Zenit reported.

Corcuera has been rector of the Legionaries' Center for Higher Studies in Rome, the order's major seminary. He has worked closely with Maciel on projects related to the governing of the congregation. He is also a consultant to the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops.

The Legionaries of Christ reports that it has 600 priests and 2,500 seminarians in 18 countries, and 65,000 members in an affiliated, mostly lay organization called Regnum Christi. About 75 of the priests are in the United States.

Maciel founded the order when he was a 20-year-old seminarian in January 1941 and has led it ever since. He has won high praise from Pope John Paul II and top Vatican officials for his service to the church. As recently as Nov. 27, the pope praised Maciel in a letter on the 60th anniversary of his priestly ordination for his "intense, generous and fruitful priestly ministry."

The accusers - two Mexican-Americans, five Mexicans and two Spaniards, one now deceased - tried for years without success to call their accusations to the attention of the pope.

Juan Vaca of Holbrooke, N.Y., one of the men who says he was subjected to years of abuse by Maciel, was delighted when he heard the news from a colleague in Spain on Sunday.

"Is this a move commanded from the Vatican?" he wondered in an e-mail to former Legionaries. "Could this be the beginning of the end for Marcial Maciel, and the first step for our Justice? Who knows? Let us keep praying."

Vaca is a former priest who headed the Legion's U.S. operations in Connecticut from 1971 to 1976. He now teaches psychology at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.

An Associated Press report is included in this story. Gerald Renner, retired religion writer for The Courant, is the co-author, with Jason Berry, of "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II."