

Controversial Priests Tapped for Jerusalem Center

By Jason Berry
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Pope John Paul II has awarded control of an important Catholic cultural center in Jerusalem to a controversial, right-wing priestly order whose founder has been accused of sexual abuse.

The order, the Legionaries of Christ, received the administrative keys to the Jerusalem landmark, the Notre Dame Center, in a festive ceremony at the Vatican on November 30. The ceremony was part of a weeklong Vatican celebration marking the 60th anniversary of the entry into the priesthood of the order's Mexican-born founder, Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, 84.

In an unusual twist, a church legal official disclosed less than a week later that a Vatican canon-law prosecutor was reopening the dormant investigation into abuse charges against Maciel. He had been accused in 1976 of sexually abusing seminarians in Mexico and in Spain in the 1950s and '60s.

Eight former members of the order filed formal charges against him in the Vatican in 1998, but the investigation was put on hold a year later by the Vatican's top theologian, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Maciel and his order have denied the charges repeatedly.

The Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem, a palatial structure at the foot of Jaffa Road, facing the walls of the Old City just outside Jaffa Gate, was built by a French order a century ago as a pilgrims' hostel. Taken over by the Vatican in 1970, it now houses a conference center, a school of tourism and hotel management, the public library of the Pontifical Mission for Palestine and a 150-bed hotel. It also houses administrative offices of several institutions linked to the local Catholic church, the so-called Latin Patriarchate, which represents mainly Arabic-speaking Catholics in Israel and the territories.

The center frequently hosts conferences exploring religious aspects of the Middle East conflict as well as Christian ties to Jerusalem, and is regarded as a key link between the Vatican and the Palestinians. The center has been "an important employer of Palestinians and a symbol of the Holy See's support of the local church," said Sister Elaine Kelley, an American nun active in a support organization for Palestinian Christians that held a conference there last April. Kelley said she was "surprised" by the transfer of the center to the Legionaries of Christ.

In November, during the weeklong ceremonies in Rome celebrating Maciel and granting him the Notre Dame keys, the pope praised the Mexican priest's "constant concern for an integral promotion of the person" and his "spiritual and missionary fruitfulness" over the years in promoting "family and human values." The ceremonies also saw the ordination of 59 new legionary priests.

Maciel founded the Legionaries of Christ in Mexico in 1941, promoting a militant spirituality that appealed to a generation of beleaguered Catholics that had witnessed bloody anti-clerical persecutions of the sort that Graham Greene wrote about in his novel "The Power and the Glory."

In 1946 Maciel traveled to Spain and Italy, winning support from the government of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco and reportedly receiving a personal blessing from Pope Pius XII.

Maciel called for re-evangelizing the Catholic Church, to restore orthodoxy as a bulwark against Communism. With help from the Spanish foreign ministry and unusual skill at private fund raising from wealthy benefactors, he opened seminaries, several universities and elite prep schools in Mexico, Chile, Europe and America.

The order today is relatively small, claiming some 500 priests and 2,500 seminarians in some 20 countries. Its annual budget, however, is some \$60 million, roughly a quarter that of the Holy See itself.

In 1949 Maciel founded a lay group, Regnum Christi ("Christ's Kingdom), as a "companion movement" to his legion. The movement claims 65,000 members around the world.

Like older orders such as the Jesuits and Franciscans, Maciel's legionaries take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Unlike the others, the legion demands a special vow never to speak ill of Maciel or of other superiors, and to inform on those who do.

Several former members of the order have spoken of Maciel's attraction to the authoritarian doctrines of Franco, the Spanish fascist leader.

"Franco was held out to us as a hero, and we were to be like soldiers following Maciel," said Jose Barba, who left the legion in 1962 and helped spearhead the 1998 Vatican abuse suit. "We were told he was a living saint. We were taught to call him Nuestro Padre" ("our father").

Juan Vaca, a professor of psychology at Mercy College and one of the complainants in the Vatican suit, said that Maciel "admired Hitler as a military man. He admired Francisco Franco. He told us to salute each other, saying 'Heil, Jesus.'"

Vaca entered the legion at age 10 in Mexico, but left in 1976 to become a diocesan priest on Long Island. That year, with the help of a local bishop, he sent his first letter to the Vatican, accusing Maciel of abusing him and other men.

The Vatican took no action on the charges in 1976, nor in 1989 when Vaca sent another petition as he left the priesthood to marry. The formal complaint in 1998 led to the opening of an inquiry, but it was tabled a year later without formal explanation.

Ratzinger, head of the Vatican office that monitors theologians and judges complaints against priests, reportedly told a Mexican bishop in 2001 that the charges created a "delicate" situation because Maciel had done much good for the church.

The legion has been banned by local bishops from operating in several American cities because of its allegedly cultlike methods. This past December, Archbishop Harry Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis banned the legion in a letter to the order's national director, the Rev. Anthony Bannon. "Our pastors continue to sense that a 'parallel church' is being encouraged," Flynn wrote, "one that separates persons from the local parish and archdiocese and creates competing structures." The letter was posted on the archdiocese Web site.

"As a result," Flynn wrote, "I have decided that Legionary priests are not to be active in any way in the archdiocese."

A legion spokesman told Catholic News Service that the order planned to "listen to [Flynn] and continue to dialogue."

Two years earlier, in 2002, the legion was banned from the diocese of Columbus, Ohio, by Bishop James Malone, who investigated the order and Regnum Christi after receiving complaints from parishioners about secret meetings and divisive tactics.

The legion's 25 American schools are mostly in affluent suburbs. Discipline is strict. At the legion's Donnellan school in Atlanta, the principal and three staffers were fired in 2000 and escorted off the grounds by police after questioning the direction of school policy. Among other things, the guidance counselor reportedly had refused to tell a legion priest what children were sharing in therapy.

The four who were dismissed sued and settled for \$375,000. A number of families withdrew their children afterward.

"The legion has the classic symptoms of a cult," said Sue Youngerman, who withdrew her child. "They separate themselves from other people and consider it okay to be dishonest because they think they have a higher purpose."

Youngerman said her daughter "went to a girls club meeting and was told not to tell her parents about it."

Despite the controversies, Maciel and his legion continue to enjoy support from influential Catholics, including former Reagan aide William Bennett, Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and the editor of the conservative First Things magazine, Rev. Richard John Neuhaus.

Mel Gibson held a special screening of "The Passion of the Christ" at the legion seminary in Rome, and had legionaries as advisers on the film.

In Los Angeles, a parents group led by Steve McEveety, who produced Gibson's "Passion," is reportedly searching for property to build a new legion school.

The legion's most important support, however, continues to come from the Vatican. Since winning a blessing from Pius XII in 1946, Maciel's legion has gone on to receive a papal Decree of Praise, equivalent to formal recognition as an order, from Pope Paul VI in 1965 and further validation from John Paul II in 1983 and again this past November. Maciel himself has accompanied John Paul II during each of his visits to Mexico in 1979, 1990 and 1993, and has been appointed to numerous papal commissions.

Maciel stepped down last week as leader of the legion, citing his age, according to the Catholic news agency Zenit.

Jason Berry is co-author of "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II" (The Free Press), an investigation of the Legion of Christ.