

NCR and the Legion: an explanation

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http://natcath.com/NCR_Online/archives2/2005a/011405/011405x.htm

On the letters pages this week you will find one by Fr. Owen Kearns of the Legionaries of Christ. He is editor in chief and publisher of the Legion-owned National Catholic Register. The letter is an edited version of the original, which accuses NCR of a slur against the Legion and of spinning the story about Legion founder Fr. Marciel Maciel Degollado, who has been accused of sexually abusing seminarians in the past (see below).

Kearns' letter also said NCR used a "journalistic resource," with the implication that we are simply interested in keeping the story alive with no regard for the facts.

It is not the first time Fr. Kearns has reacted to a story about either the Legion's activities or its founder. Whether Kearns' responses have been solicited in the preparation of an article or delivered to us in reaction to one about Maciel, the content has been consistent: Fr. Maciel is demonstrably innocent and all one need do is consult the Legion's Web site for the necessary information.

One might come away with the impression that NCR and the Legion are engaged in meaningless rounds of gainsaying.

Perhaps an explanation from our perspective is in order. Why do we do what we do? Why all the stories on the Legion?

Among the elements that form NCR's mission is a deep commitment to a community's right to know, even a church community. That extends to its right to know about what the late Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray, in a speech about Catholic journalism, referred to as "the dirty stuff of history."

One has to be careful here. Any community as large and diverse as the Catholic church is going to raise a lot of the dirt of history. My mail for a week could give one the impression that the church is simultaneously the most impressive or the most corrupt institution on earth; that it is simultaneously irrelevant and among the most important forces in people's lives. I hear from people who have had it and left, as well as others who will not be forced out. You get the picture. So how to decide what to report on?

In terms of the dust of history, which is all around us, we ignore far more than we pursue. However, when we hear persistent complaints from the wider community about a group or a leader, we often take a deeper look. In the case of the Legion, the stories we've published about the order and its involvement in schools and parishes have been done after hearing frequently from responsible segments of the Catholic community in one city or another. In some of those cases, we have gone to great lengths placing a reporter on site. The stories have resulted from numerous interviews and always involved interviews with representatives of all sides involved, including the Legion.

In the case of Fr. Maciel, as has been stated numerous times in our pages, our pursuit of the story stems from the severity of the allegations, the apparent credibility of those making the accusations, the sincerity of their motives and the reactions of others in positions of authority in the church who believe the case should be heard.

I have nothing personal against the Legion. But if responsible Catholics in a number of places around the country, including at least two bishops, find their tactics harmful to the larger community, then we believe the community should know. We do the reporting so that others can have the information to ask intelligent questions and make informed assessments in their own regions.

As for Fr. Maciel, the Legion founder who has been accused of abusing seminarians in the past, NCR would like the church to consider seriously the charges in an appropriate legal forum.

When I received the letter from Fr. Kearns that appears in this issue, I responded personally for the first time.

In part, I wrote on Dec. 14: "Nothing on the Legion's Web site -- nor any of your repeated protestations to date -- begins to address, in any substantive way, the allegations made against Fr. Maciel."

I also said, as the paper has on this page in the past, that if Fr. Maciel tried to function in the United States, he would be removed from active ministry under the procedures approved by the U.S. bishops and the Vatican.

"That he is permitted not only to continue to function in active ministry but with special blessings from the pope is a scandal.

"Endlessly repeating that the accusations are false does not make them so. Asking Catholics to simply trust the Legion's defense of its founder is the kind of thinking that led the U.S. bishops down such a disastrous road when they hid abuse and made excuses for errant priests."

I concluded by saying that the Legion "has done little to imbue its claims with credibility."

"What we write is not a 'journalistic resource' or 'spin' but an earnest plea that the church, at the highest levels of authority, finally recognize the seriousness of clergy sex abuse and act accordingly."

Last week's issue carried the news that a Vatican prosecutor had agreed to reopen a case brought by eight men who had earlier filed sex abuse charges against the Legion's founder. The story also noted that Minneapolis-St. Paul Archbishop Harry Flynn had ordered the Legion "not be active in any way in the archdiocese."

Perhaps the Legion simply has a public relations problem; maybe there is a vast, expertly coordinated conspiracy against Maciel. What is certain is that the community deserves to know more, not less. That's why we'll keep reporting when the opportunities arise with hope that church processes, in the end, will shed light and not more secrecy on the serious questions such stories raise.

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