

March 17, 2007 - Real reform eludes American Catholics

Lawn Griffiths, East Valley Tribune (AZ)

American Catholics who want the Vatican to adopt reforms won't be effective until they find an ear in Rome, says an investigative writer whose books about clergy sexual abuse were a factor in Pope Benedict XVI's removal last May of the founder of the Legion of Christ.

Bishops across the U.S. are working hard to ensure that procedures are in place to prevent abuse and catch abusers, said Jason Berry, co-author of "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II."

"The greater problem is in Rome, and I think the greater challenge to the reform movement of Catholics in the United States is to establish dialogue with officials in Rome and get the right information to them so they will be forced to reckon with the flawed responses that they have made," he said.

Berry will speak March 24 in Tempe to Catholics involved in Call to Action, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, and Voice of the Faithful, all of which have criticized the Roman Catholic Church, at all levels, for ineffectively stemming sexual abuse of children, primarily by priests, going back decades. Some groups have pressed for an end to mandatory celibacy, a greater role of lay people in decision-making, permitting priests to marry and allowing women in the priesthood.

At the five-hour event, the investigative writer from New Orleans will show a rough cut of his new documentary film, "Vows of Silence," which examines the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, now 87, whom Benedict expelled from the priesthood and ordered to spend the remainder of his life in "prayer and penitence." The Mexican priest founded the Legion of Christ in 1941 and saw it grow to an order of 650 priests and 2,500 seminarians in 20 countries, plus 50,000 members of the lay affiliate Regnum Christi. Degollado, called a "favorite of Pope John Paul II," was accused of abusing at least 20 victims between 1943 and the early 1960s.

"That is a lot of people for a priest to abuse," Berry said. "The Vatican created Marcial, sheltered him and, in the end, had to ease him out by trying to minimize, in the media, the damage that he had done."

The case "reached closer to Pope John Paul II than any other scandal or canonical proceeding within the church that any of us are aware of," said Berry. "The allegations were made known, both in the media and canon law cases themselves in 1997 and 1998, and for six years, John Paul did nothing. He refused to take action on it.

"The Vatican has not come to terms with what this crisis means and the kind of systemic reforms that are necessary," he said.

Berry's first book in 1992, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children," had its roots in his own investigation of a priest named Gilbert Gauthé, who was indicted in 1984 by a Lafayette, La., grand jury on 34 counts of sexual abuse involving nine boys.

"The film goes into some depth on the way the Vatican investigated Marcial, and it profiles the men, primarily from Mexico," Berry said. It also follows the process that a canon lawyer, Monsignor Charles Scicluna, took to investigate the powerful priest. Berry calls the Legion of Christ a "money machine within the church," with an annual budget of \$60 million and ownership, since 1995, of the influential National Catholic Register weekly newspaper, a tool of fundraising.

Berry said he was disappointed that when Pope Benedict removed Degollado, he "did not put hard scrutiny on the Legion itself and Regnum Christi, so the film addresses that as well."

In the book "Vows of Silence," he writes about abuse scandals in Arizona. They tell of the Rev. Robert Trupia, who began his priest work in Yuma in 1973. There, he "almost immediately began molesting 11- and 12-year-old altar boys in the rectory after Sunday services." The priest, who would later serve as judicial vicar, was charged in Yuma in 2001 with seven counts of child molestation. Trupia was briefly jailed, but the charges were

dropped after his lawyer argued that the five-year statute of limitations on sex crimes committed before 1978 had expired. He was defrocked in 2004.

He also wrote about sexual misconduct by the Rev. James Rausch, one-time general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, who was bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Phoenix from 1977 until he died in 1981. Investigations found that Rausch had paid a street hustler for sex. In 2003, the Boston Globe's Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation reported on unsealed court documents, in connection with 11 lawsuits, that Rausch, Trupia and a third priest engaged in sex in the early 1980s with a Tucson teenager who was later given a chancery job to ensure his silence. "Rausch was quite a symptom of the crisis to come," Berry said.

While there were widespread reports of abuses in local dioceses, he said, the Boston Globe's investigation and many lawsuits finally brought the scandal to national attention five years ago, forcing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to establish safeguards against abuse.

"I think it is hard for people to appreciate how extensive this crisis is," Berry said. "Church leaders understandably want it to go away, but it does reflect on systemic problems on the governing of the church. The fact is that bishops do not have a tradition of accountability, and there's the Vatican's aversion to removing bishops who blunder or who abuse themselves."