

Vatican Revisits Abuse Charges

Accused Priest Is Close To The Pope

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The Vatican has reopened an investigation into charges first reported nearly eight years ago that a powerful Mexican priest close to the pope sexually abused seminarians.

The allegations focus on the actions of the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, now 84 and based in Rome. He leads a religious order known as the Legionaries of Christ, which claims 600 priests in 18 countries. Its U.S. headquarters is in Orange and it has a seminary in Cheshire.

The allegations surfaced in a Courant report in February 1997. Nine former members of the Legion said Maciel first abused them years ago when they were young boys or teenagers, ages 10 to 16, in seminaries in Spain and Italy.

The accusers, all professional men - two Mexican-Americans, five Mexicans and two Spaniards, one now deceased - tried for years to call their accusations to the attention of Pope John Paul II, who nonetheless has remained effusive in his praise of Maciel. Just five weeks ago, on Nov. 27, the pope praised Maciel in a letter on the 60th anniversary of his priestly ordination, citing his "intense, generous and fruitful priestly ministry."

A week later, the complainants against Maciel were told the Vatican was reopening a canon law investigation that had been squelched without explanation in 1999.

The canon law case had been lodged formally by the former Legionaries against Maciel in November 1998. A high-level Vatican agency, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, accepted the complaint as credible for further investigation. But it never proceeded and no investigation was made.

Under a 2002 policy adopted by the U.S. hierarchy, an American priest facing allegations such as those made against Maciel would be suspended immediately while an investigation was conducted. The Vatican has no such policy.

In a letter dated Dec. 2, Martha Wegan, a Vatican-approved canon lawyer who is an advocate for the men's case, informed them that a new "permanent promoter of justice" for the congregation has been appointed and wanted to know if they wanted to proceed.

"It seems to me that now the case is being taken seriously," she wrote.

"They say now they are taking it seriously? Before it wasn't serious?" scoffed Juan Vaca, 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.

Vaca said there was no question the men wanted the case to go forward. He said Jose de J. Barba Martin, spokesman for the men accusing Maciel, informed Wegan they wanted to proceed. Barba is a Harvard-trained professor of Latin American studies at Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México in Mexico City.

Vaca raised accusations against Maciel in letters to Pope John Paul II in 1978 and 1989 but never got a response. He named 20 others who he said had been abused by Maciel, his superior. His accounts of sexual improprieties were supported by another priest, the Rev. Felix Alarcon, who said he also was abused.

Alarcon, now a retired priest in Madrid, established the Legion's U.S. headquarters in Milford, Conn., in 1965. It moved later to Orange. The letters were sent by diplomatic pouch through the Diocese of Rockville Center in New York via the papal nunciature, the pope's representative, in Washington and acknowledged as having been received.

Maciel and the Legionaries of Christ have vigorously denied the allegations of abuse. Maciel has accused the nine men of a conspiracy to defame him.

Barba said it appears to him that Vatican authorities are heavily divided about how to handle the complaints against Maciel, accounting for praise from the pope one week and a decision to investigate him the next.

There is such a division in the church in Mexico. It was not until 2002 that the charges against Maciel were aired at a meeting of the Mexican hierarchy, when it was acknowledged for the first time publicly that the Mexican church had a problem with priestly sexual abuse, as did the U.S. church.

Two Mexican priests who helped Maciel's accusers advance their complaints say their careers suffered.

One, the Rev. Antonio Roqueni, who helped draft the canon law complaints, lost his job as a canon lawyer for Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City.

The other, the Rev. Alberto Athie, was an adviser on social-justice issues to the Mexican bishops' conference and an officer of Caritas, the bishops' national charity. He said he was marginalized and felt compelled to resign his positions after he tried to bring to the attention of church authorities accusations by a dying former priest that Maciel had abused him as a teenager.

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."