

Vatican orders probe of Mexican order's founder

8 ex-seminarians say priest abused them decades ago

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May 9, 2005

http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2005/05/09/vatican_orders_probe_of_mexican_orders_founder/

MEXICO CITY -- It took more than 50 years, but eight former seminary students who say they were sexually abused by one of the most powerful men in the Roman Catholic Church are getting a hearing.

In December, the Vatican ordered a full investigation into charges by the former members of the Legion of Christ against the Rev. Marcial Maciel, the order's 85-year-old Mexican founder. And last month, Monsignor Charles J. Scicluna, the Catholic Church's promoter of justice of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, traveled to the United States and Mexico to collect testimony about Maciel from dozens of former Legionaries, according to four of the coaccusers.

The case, which dates to the 1940s, was reopened late last year by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who had shelved it five years earlier. Last month, Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, succeeding John Paul II.

"I was very skeptical before," said Alejandro Espinosa, a 67-year-old rancher and former seminarian who said he was forced to perform sexual acts on Maciel in the 1950s. In 2002, frustrated with the lack of a Vatican investigation into the men's allegations, Espinosa published "The Legion," a book in which he relates the alleged abuse in graphic detail. He said he received death threats after the book came out.

Espinosa said, however, that he has new hope of finding justice in the case after his three-hour interview with Scicluna in early April. "Now, if I'm not totally convinced, I think there is an 85 percent chance that they will find Maciel guilty," Espinosa said in a recent telephone interview from his home in northern Tamaulipas State.

Maciel, who stepped down as the Legion's leader in January, citing his advanced age, has denied the allegations. "I never engaged in the sort of repulsive behavior these men accuse me of," he wrote in an open letter posted on the website of the Rome-based Legion in 2002. Since then, all requests for comment have been handled by his spokesman, Jay Dunlap.

"We are confident that any full and fair examination of the facts will fully exonerate Father Maciel," Dunlap wrote in an e-mailed response to a Globe reporter's queries.

The alleged offenses occurred too long ago to try Maciel under criminal law, so the alleged victims, mostly Mexicans in their 60s and 70s, decided to pursue the case under the Vatican's canon law.

The priest faces charges of sexual abuse and of violating the sacrament of confession, an even more serious crime under church law that carries a mandatory sentence of excommunication.

If church prosecutors determine there is strong evidence against Maciel, the case will go before the Vatican's Apostolic Tribunal of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has exclusive jurisdiction to try "crimes against morality."

The case, the first to involve the leader of a priestly order, could bring the scandal over pedophilia in the church to an even higher level. The Legion, which was founded in 1941 in Mexico, is one of the fastest growing Roman Catholic orders, with more than 650 priests and 2,500 seminarians in some 20 countries. It also runs dozens of universities and elite secondary schools.

Those achievements won Maciel the support of John Paul, who often cited the Legion's founder as a model of priestly service. And in late November, the ailing pontiff attended the 60th anniversary celebrations of Maciel's ordination in Rome.

But several days later, Ratzinger gave the order to reopen the case against Maciel. According to the Rev. Alberto Athie, a Mexican priest who served as an intermediary between the coaccusers and the Vatican, Ratzinger had shelved the case in 1999 on the grounds that the case would upset the pontiff.

Ratzinger's reasons for ordering the investigation are unclear, since neither he nor other Vatican officials have publicly commented on the case. But the fact that the order came from the man who became pope has given the former Legionaries cause for optimism.

"We can no longer make excuses for the church by saying that the pope didn't know. The current pope knows well what happened," said Saul Barales, 73, a retired teacher in Mexico City, who contends that he was subjected to psychological and sexual abuse during his 11 years in the Legion, from 1946 to 1957.

Other alleged victims said they were encouraged by the apparent seriousness with which the Vatican prosecutor was pursuing their case.

"I know that Scicluna returned to Rome very impressed and shocked by the overwhelming evidence that he got from the testimonies," said Juan Jose Vaca, 67, a former priest and psychology professor at Mercy College in New York, who spent 30 years in the Legion.

"I am sure he was totally convinced that what he heard was the truth."

It is not the first time the Vatican has investigated Maciel.

Between 1956 and 1959, he was suspended from duties while high-level church officials looked into allegations of drug abuse and other issues. He was later exonerated -- a fact used by the Legion to defend his innocence.

"It strikes us as totally incredible that anything like that could have been going on, and nobody bring it forward," said Dunlap, the Legion spokesman.

Former Legionaries say the vow of obedience they took to the order prevented them from speaking out at the time.

"We were told that the investigators were sent by the devil to destroy the Legion," said Vaca.

Of the eight coaccusers, he has the longest and most intimate history with the Legion, which he describes as functioning like a cult, demanding supreme obedience and absolute secrecy.

Vaca said that in 1976, when he was the Legion's top official in North America, he was asked to cover for another priest's sexual abuse. He said that request prompted him to leave the order and begin writing letters to the Vatican about Maciel, the first one nearly 30 years ago.

"Scicluna told me, 'We owe you a public retribution, because we failed to protect you,' " said Vaca, his voice breaking with emotion, adding, "I hope he keeps his word."