

Reflections on the Legion of Christ: 2003-2006

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Introduction to Legion of Christ Session: ICSA Conference, October 18, 2003, Enfield, Connecticut

Dr. Jorge Erdely, editor of the *Latin American Journal for the Academic Study of Religions*, prepared a paper for our California conference in June on "The Legionaries of Christ and the Vatican's Geopolitical Strategy for Latin America." Because Dr. Erdely was unable to attend the conference in June, Dr. Cesar Mascarenas presented it for him.

Back in March, before the conference, Dr. Erdely suggested that we consider organizing a panel on the Legion of Christ, a relatively new Catholic order, founded in the 1940s, that has generated some controversy in the press because of alleged psychological manipulation and molestation charges against the founder. Dr. Erdely suggested that Dr. Jose Barba, Researcher and Professor of Humanities, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Mexico City, coordinate the panel. Herb Rosedale and I said that we would want to have some representation from the Legion so that its perspective could be aired as well. Dr. Erdely and Dr. Barba both agreed that the Legion should be included.

Shortly before the California conference I received an e-mail message from Giuseppe Ferrari, director of GRIS in Bologna, Italy. GRIS is a cult educational organization associated with the Italian Catholic Council of Bishops. Mr. Ferrari, who was concerned about Dr. Erdely's paper at our conference, relayed a letter from Mr. Jay Dunlap, Communications Director of the Legion of Christ/Regnum Christi in North Haven, CT. Mr. Dunlap said:

The congregation of the Legionaries of Christ is a Catholic religious congregation fully approved by the Church. They were founded in Mexico City in 1941. The first diocesan approval came in 1948. The definitive approval was given by Pope Paul VI in 1965. Their rule of life ("Constitutions") was approved by Pope John Paul II on June 29, 1983. Thus, as a part of the Catholic Church, and as a religious congregation that has the approval and continuing esteem of the Holy Father in no way may it be called a cult or sect...

In recent dates a few disgruntled ex-members are actively using the Internet and the media to try to classify the Legion as a cult or sect. As an official observer of GRIS, under the auspices of the Italian Catholic Conference of Bishops, I can assure you there are no objective bases to this effort.

Beginning in 1996 some of these ex-members, with the support of two U.S. reporters, raised allegations of sexual abuse against Fr. Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legionaries. Fr. Maciel has constantly denied the alleged facts while expressing forgiveness for those who accuse him. These false allegations have been many times repeated over the past few years, always using the media, in what clearly seems a denigration campaign. The Legionaries have set up a website with some of the basic facts regarding these issues. You may find it at www.legionaryfacts.org. [If this subject interests you, I recommend that you inspect this Web site.]

During the conference, I received a phone call from and had a long conversation with Mr. Dunlap. I explained to Mr. Dunlap that our predilection for the adjective "cultic" and the fact that our conference is entitled "Cults and New Religious Movements" emphasize that our

discussion of a particular group doesn't necessarily imply that it is a cult. I also discussed some of the following points, which I sent to Mr. Ferrari:

Regarding the distinction you make between control and abusive dynamics characterizing a group and occurring occasionally within a large group: I agree completely with that distinction. That is one reason why we emphasize that our "lists" are lists of groups about which we have received inquiries or have information and not a list of "cults." However, once a group or organization has stirred some controversy, as have the Legionaries, the question arises as to the degree to which dynamics of abuse and control characterize the organization. Just as it would be improper to draw firm conclusions in the negative, it is likewise improper to draw firm conclusions in the positive—until there is an adequate body of data from which to make conclusions. About all one can say is that there is controversy. Some might be inclined to give the organization the benefit of the doubt; others might not....

One aspect of the controversy that has arisen over the Legionaries is the perception many people have that the organization is defensive and dismissive of all criticism. In defense of the Legionaries I have noticed in my informal conversations with various people that some of the antagonism toward the organization derives from antagonism toward its conservative theological stance, not necessarily to its practices. However, I personally know two conservative Catholics, both converts from Evangelical Protestantism and both active as Catholic educators, who are critical of the Legionaries because of reports of heavy-handed and abusive treatment of SOME members... Hence, I don't believe that all of the criticism of the Legionaries reflects theological differences.

If it doesn't listen thoughtfully to criticism, a large and varied organization that is NOT characterized by abusive practices cannot correct what abuse is bound to occur now and then. Moreover, it thereby runs the risk of reinforcing the very perception to which it objects.

The antidote to the perhaps unintended reinforcement of critical attitudes toward an organization is honest and open dialogue. I hope to create a forum for such dialogue at our Connecticut conference.

In line with those sentiments we invited the Legion to send one or two representatives to this conference in order to present their perspective on the issues. They declined, although they did express a desire to continue the dialogue we had begun. Father LeBar and I visited them on Thursday and spent several hours in conversation with them.

After the California conference Mr. Dunlap and I exchanged several e-mails. In one of our exchanges, I said:

It appears to me that the abuse allegations leveled against the Legion fall into three categories:

1. sexual abuse [charges against the founder]
2. psychologically abusive manipulation of prospects, recruits, and members
3. Psychological, social, and economic manipulation of organizations and leaders in organizations (e.g., to take over schools; to protect the Legion's reputation)

If the bulk of criticisms in any one or two of these categories is invalid, it does not necessarily follow that the criticisms in the remaining category(ies) are invalid. Hence, even if it were demonstrated that the sexual abuse allegations are indeed untrue or that they only occurred in the distant past, then it may still be the case that criticisms in categories two and three are valid. All, of course, may be false. But the falsehood of one doesn't necessitate the falsehood of the others.

I believe a persuasive argument could be made that enthusiastic, growth-oriented groups, such as the Legion, are at risk of using manipulative methods, for members' enthusiasm may sometimes cause them to lose sight of the proper relationship between ends and means. Nearly 20 years ago, for example, leaders of the Evangelical campus ministry, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, approached my colleagues and me because they recognized that their youthful campus ministers sometimes lost their ethical bearings in their enthusiasm to bring Christ to as many people as possible. They recognized that psychological manipulation within InterVarsity was, to use Giuseppe Ferrari's word, episodic. Their recognition of such and willingness to do something about the episodic manipulations are important factors preventing psychological manipulation from becoming characteristic of the organization.

Moreover, even if the leaders of the Legion were worse than its harshest critics imply, it does not necessarily follow that its members (and the members of Regnum Christi) are not on the whole well intentioned. Nor would even a highly manipulative organizational climate nullify all the good work that members accomplish. I have not as yet spoken to one critic of the Legion who does not acknowledge that many good and decent people with honorable intentions do much that is commendable.

It seems to me that the key issues vis a vis charges of psychological manipulation are: (1) to what degree does it exist and (2) if at least some instances of manipulation occur, what corrective and preventive actions do Legion leaders take to keep it to a minimum. The perception that even some conservative Catholics have is that the Legion is aggressively defensive and unwilling to acknowledge any validity to any criticisms, except perhaps as token gestures. Of course, if the Legion is indeed a victim of a vicious conspiracy, such defensiveness becomes more understandable. However, a reluctance to acknowledge and constructively respond to valid criticisms increases the credibility of those that are invalid. I expect that you will address these issues, for, as your message below indicates, you believe that this perception is unjustified.

Also, I am very interested in considering for publication an article that gives the Legion's perspective on its critics' claims, regardless of whether or not you agree to participate in the conference.

Mr. Dunlap has indicated that he is interested in contributing an article to our journal, and I hope that we can begin a useful dialogue in print. [Editor's Note: An article was never submitted.]

This issue is much more complex than it appears. The Legion, for example, has statements from individuals who contradict what you will hear today and contradict some of the allegations that have been made in the press. I have, for example, a statement by Joseph Williams, one of the ex-novices in the Hartford Courant article of June 10, 1996. He says:

I wish it to be known that I emphatically disavow the tone and general impression of the article, and I disagree with nearly all of the details of the article's description of how I left the novitiate in Mt. Kisco...To call what we did an "elaborately planned getaway" is silly; personally, I find it insulting....I categorically reject as false and defamatory the description Gerald Renner [the author of the article] makes of the Legionaries of Christ and their seminary program as:

- Militaristically-styled
- Demeaning,
- Boot-camp like training program
- Brainwashing,

- Psychologically manipulating and intimidating us,
- Subjecting us to mind-numbing, sleep-depriving tactics,
- Stealing our personality away.

The controversy involving the Legion rests on a massive, tangled web of charges and countercharges. What sounds convincing and credible on its face, such as Mr. Williams' statement above and, in my opinion, the testimonies you are about to hear, often can be challenged by another statement or line of argument. As I go through the material I have collected, which is a small fraction of what is available, my head spins as I attempt to discern the truth. For this reason, I must treat my personal opinions as provisional.

Update (July 18, 2006)

Since I wrote the introduction above, much information about the Legion of Christ has come into the public arena, including actions taken by a Vatican that had long ignored the official complaints of ex-Legionaries who said they had been molested by the organization's founder, Marcial Maciel.

A very important event was the publication in 2004 of *Vows of Silence* by journalists Jason Berry and Gerald Renner. Nearly one-half of this book dealt with the Legion of Christ. Berry and Renner review the events that have generated controversy, the Legion's defense against various allegations, and the Church's response.

The Legion's primary defense against the most threatening allegation, i.e., that Maciel had molested youngsters in his charge, was to claim "conspiracy":

The nine men were lying as "part of a coordinated campaign to smear Father Maciel," "to teach him a lesson" and "punish him for his pride." Secondly, the Vatican had exonerated Maciel after a two-year investigation in 1958. Having failed then, the old enemies were raising *new* allegations of sexual abuse. (Berry & Renner, 2004, p. 189)

To back up their claim of conspiracy, the Legion had accumulated a large body of information, much of which was available on a special Web site, legionaryfacts.org. When I examined this site in 2003, it included Father Maciel's denial of the allegations against him, a one-and-a-half page "Statement of the Legionaries of Christ" from Fr. Thomas Williams, a *National Catholic Register* column from Fr. Owen Kearn, an article, "Feathers of Scandal," by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, six other letters, and a collection of testimonials from well known and respected intellectuals. The Legion also had other material, some of which they gave me, designed to discredit Maciel's accusers, including a report from a company claiming that one of the accusers had given a doctored photo to a news organization (a photo that the accuser claimed Maciel had himself doctored so as to impress the parents of his students—it portrayed the student with the pope).

During a new religions conference that I attended, a colleague (not a member of the Legion or Regnum Christi) gave me a half-inch packet of information containing documents purportedly demonstrating the dishonesty of Maciel's accusers and the fact that "everybody" in the Vatican deemed the charges spurious, even a liberal Cardinal.

I was impressed, not so much by the persuasiveness of these documents (although at the time several gave me pause), but by the scale of the Legion's effort to protect its founder's reputation, even with a very minor player such as the organization I worked for. They seemed to be ready and able to rebut EACH AND EVERY critical allegation that any "disgruntled" former legionary made.

This puzzled me at first because it seemed to me that the good works of and good people in the Legion and Regnum Christi would not be nullified, if Maciel indeed had molested students and seminarians. I did not then understand, however, the psychological

importance of the concept of "charism."

"Charism" refers to a: "Divine Spiritual Gift to individuals or groups for the good of the community. Examples: prophecy, healing, preaching, teaching, administration, generosity and Love is the greatest of all"

(http://www.catholic-johannesburg.org.za/glossary/term?item_id=3816&glossary_item_id=1313). As Lennon (2006) makes clear, Maciel and the Legion have encouraged belief in the divine mission of the founder and his movement. Indeed, in one of my conversations with Legion leaders, I was taken aback by one man's statement that he would have to leave the Legion, if he found out that the charges against Maciel were true. It would mean that he had devoted his life to a false charism.

To me this reaction was consistent with what some research suggested was at the heart of the cultic dynamic. In the 1991 survey that gave rise to ICSA's Group Psychological Abuse Scale (Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994), the two items that received the highest ratings from 308 subjects from 101 different groups were (abridged): (1) the group is an elite; (2) dissent is not tolerated. In line with this finding, I often give the following shorthand description of the cultic dynamic: "If you want to feel special, shut up and obey."

Belief in the charism of its founder enables Legionaries to feel part of an elite movement (although they would, of course, quickly cover up and deny any feelings of pride that might be associated with this belief). As Lennon and others have maintained, obedience and the secret vow not to speak ill of the Legion ensure that members continue to participate in this elite organization. If the founder were a pedophile and a spiritual fake, his charism couldn't be genuine and his movement couldn't be special. Moreover, all the subservience, self-sacrifice, and secrecy to which members subjected themselves would have been in the service of a lie. Therefore, the founder's special status must be protected at all costs. Hence, the Legion's vicious attacks on Maciel's accusers and dismissal of ex-legionaries who publicly criticized the organization were adaptive responses to the cultic dynamic in which they were enmeshed.

Of course, one could reply that this criticism would apply to all religious orders with a vow of obedience. However, (a) not all orders manifest what amounts to a cult of personality of the founder; (b) not all orders demand a private vow of secrecy and commitment to never criticize the organization; and (c) not all orders are as aggressively defensive as the Legion (a possible sign of overcompensating hubris?).

The Legion's offensive strategy of defense began to founder as the allegations against Maciel and the Legion (allegations of psychological manipulation and abuse, as well as sexual abuse) mounted and as more people—in part because of the work of [REGAIN](#)—spoke out publicly and privately, especially within conservative Catholic circles.

The first hint that the tide was turning against the Legion occurred in January of 2005 when the Vatican reopened the investigation of Maciel, who shortly thereafter stepped down as head of the Legion (Renner, 2005, January 25). In April of 2005, Monsignor Charles Scicluna "traveled to the United States and Mexico, where he personally interviewed more than 30 people, including seven of the eight men who made the accusations, as well as several others claiming abuse who had not publicly come forward before" (Renner, 2005, May 24).

Although initially there was concern that the Vatican would simply let the controversy languish, on May 19, 2006 the *New York Times* reported: "The Vatican said Friday it had asked the Mexican founder of the conservative order Legionaries of Christ to renounce celebrating public Masses and live a life of 'prayer and repentance' following its investigation into allegations he sexually abused seminarians" (Vatican disciplines Legionary founder, 2006, May 19). Maciel and the Legion continued to deny the charges, but offered no resistance to the Vatican, and the Legion has since pledged its support of the Pope (Head of

Legionaries tells pope members completely adhere to pope, 2006, June 19). Although the Vatican said it was grateful for the work of the Legion and refused to take formal action against Maciel because of his age (86), some observers praised Pope Benedict for disciplining Maciel (e.g., Berry, 2006, June 4; Van Diema, 2006, May 18), although others were disappointed at what they saw as a weak response (Martin, 2006, July 12).

Today, www.legionaryfacts.org is much toned down from the Web site I originally visited in 2003. Gone are the many testimonies and articles impugning the honesty of Maciel's accusers. Instead, there are (as of July 18, 2006) a small collection of "communiqués." The Legion's reply is especially noteworthy for what it doesn't say, which it once said emphatically ("Maciel is an innocent victim of a conspiracy!"), as well as for the submissive tone of what it does say:

1. Father Marcial Maciel has received during his life a great number of accusations. In the last few years, some of these were presented to the Holy See so that a canonical process would be opened.
2. Facing the accusations made against him, he declared his innocence and, following the example of Jesus Christ, decided not to defend himself in any way.
3. Considering his advanced age and his frail health, the Holy See has decided to forgo a canonical hearing and to "invite him to a reserved life of penitence and prayer, relinquishing any form of public ministry".
4. Father Maciel, with the spirit of obedience to the Church that has always characterized him, has accepted this communiqué with faith, complete serenity and tranquility of conscience, knowing that it is a new cross that God, the Father of Mercy, has allowed him to suffer and that will obtain many graces for the Legion of Christ and the Regnum Christi Movement.
5. The Legionaries of Christ and the members of Regnum Christi, following the example of Father Maciel and united to him, accept and will always accept the directives of the Holy See with profound spirit of obedience and faith. We renew our commitment to work with great intensity to live our charism of charity and extend the Kingdom of Christ serving the Church.

Assuming that Maciel is guilty of the sexual abuse charges (and the evidence points to his guilt, in my opinion), it would not be surprising that he would have developed a structure of secrecy within his new organization. That foundational structure of secrecy probably set the stage for the manipulation and abuse to which so many have testified.

It seems very unlikely to me that the psychological abuse of members will end without eliminating the cultic dynamics that underlie it. If it wants to make the Legion and Regnum Christi worthy of the Church, the Vatican needs to do more than put Maciel out to pasture. It needs to continue to listen closely to the testimonies of former members who were psychologically or sexually abused within the organization. It needs to study and monitor the psychological dynamics of control and influence within the Legion. It needs to eliminate the private vow of secrecy and encourage dissent and questioning proper to a religious order. And it needs to teach the Legion's organizational leaders (especially new leaders who hopefully will be moved in to the organization) how to think psychologically as well as theologically. Only then will the Vatican be able to institute organizational changes that will drastically reduce the "episodic" frequency of abuse—psychological as well as sexual.

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