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JASON BERRY; Special to The Courant

ACCUSED PRIEST IS SYNOD DELEGATE

Pope John Paul II has appointed an influential priest in Rome who has been accused of child sexual abuse as a special delegate to a major church conference next month.

The priest, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder and head of the Legionaries of Christ, is one of 21 people the pope chose to attend the Synod for America to be held in Rome from Nov. 16 to Dec. 12.

The papal appointment dismayed and mystified some Vatican watchers in and out of the church.

"They are completely out of touch with what is going on," said the Rev. Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer who once worked for the Vatican Embassy in Washington.

The synod will involve a select group of 250 church leaders from North and South America in talks about evangelization, economic justice and church cooperation in the new millennium. Most of the participants will be bishops elected by their peers in each nation, and they will be joined by cardinals, several leaders of religious orders and the group the pope picked.

"This is tragic," said the Rev. John Heagle, a psychotherapist and canon lawyer in the Archdiocese of Seattle, who has worked for years with clergy involved in sexual abuse and the abused.

"It's going to place bishops in a very awkward, if not impossible, situation," Heagle said. "They'll have to be quiet, or ask who gave the pope this advice, or openly say they approved. I'm just stunned."

The complaints of sexual misconduct against Maciel were made public in The Courant in February. Since then, the Vatican has neither commented on them nor investigated them.

Only the Holy See, the church's central administration headed by the pope, can order an investigation into the complaints. Maciel lives at his order's headquarters in Rome.

“To me, this is their answer without saying that they don't believe us,” said Juan Vaca, one of the accusers and a former priest who was president of the Legionaries in the United States until he quit the order in 1976.

The order's U.S. headquarters is in Orange, and it has a seminary in Cheshire.

Founded by Maciel in Mexico in 1941, recruiting boys as young as 10, the order now reports it has 350 priests and 2,000 seminarians -- double the number of a decade ago -- in 18 countries. It is tightly disciplined, traditional and secretive.

Vaca, 59, a college guidance counselor who lives in Holbrook, N.Y., is among a group of nine professional men -- also including three professors, a priest, a teacher, an engineer, a rancher and a lawyer -- who say that Maciel molested them when they were as young as 12 in church seminaries in Spain and Italy during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. One, a professor who was a former priest and who died in 1995, left behind an accusatory deathbed statement.

They said they decided to go public because Pope John Paul II did not respond to letters from two priests sent through church channels in 1978 and 1989 seeking an investigation, and then praised Maciel in 1994 as an “efficacious guide to youth.”

Maciel, 77, a native of Mexico, declined to be interviewed, but denied any wrongdoing through a law firm and, after publication of the accusations Feb. 23, in a letter to The Courant. He said his accusers are disgruntled former Legionaries conspiring to depose him.

As head of a religious order with ministries in 18 countries, Maciel reports directly to the Holy See.

His appointment to the synod is seen by his supporters as vindication.

“The Legionaries of Christ are pleased that the Vicar of Christ has appointed Father Maciel to the special Synod for America,” said a statement issued by Father Owen Kearns, a spokesman for the order in Connecticut.

“Father Maciel will undoubtedly contribute to the broad experience of priestly life and deep, firsthand understanding of the Church in the complex cultural diversity of Latin America,” the statement continued.

The Vatican has no stated policy for dealing with accusations of sexual abuse made against clerics under its control. As a sovereign nation in international law, it is immune from lawsuits.

Calls for comment have gone unanswered by both the Vatican Press Office and Archbishop Agostino Cacciavillan, the pope's ambassador to the United States.

In contrast, many dioceses in the United States and some in other countries have instituted procedures to deal with sexual abuse accusations so they are not covered up as they had been in the past.

An internal church report in 1985 warned the U.S. bishops of a crisis if they failed to adopt a forceful policy. Since then, the U.S. Catholic Church has lost an estimated \$650 million in legal and medical costs, according to Doyle, who wrote part of the 1985 report while serving at the Vatican Embassy.

Now an Air Force chaplain based in Oklahoma, Doyle testified during the summer on behalf of nine plaintiffs in a priest's Dallas trial that resulted in a \$120 million jury verdict, now on appeal.

"I would be very surprised if there would be any investigation" of Maciel, Doyle said. "And if there is an investigation, it will not be impartial."

He said the papal decision to appoint Maciel to the synod is a way for the Vatican to respond to the accusations without investigating.

"The thinking goes, 'We will do this and people will believe [the allegations] are untrue,' "he said.

"The thinking is very insular," Doyle said. "They are completely out of touch with what is going on. There are still people in the Vatican who think it is a sin to believe the earth is round. Denial -- that's their response."

The Vatican's response is "going back to unreality," said Leslie Lothstein, a psychotherapist who has treated hundreds of priests at the Institute of Living in Hartford.

"He [Maciel] must be an incredibly powerful man to get that kind of support from the pope," Lothstein said. "Why would they appoint him, unless they perceive him to be important in terms of money or power that creates a wall of invincibility around him?"

Jonathan Kwitney, author of a new and generally laudatory biography of the pope, "Man of the Century," said "it is a great flaw in this pope" to be protective of aberrant clerics.

"He sees a greater danger that the church will be enveloped in scandal than by the hurt to people caused by these priests. . . . It makes a defiant statement to pick someone like this," Kwitney said. "Why does he want to raise the issue, rather than leave the matter rest?"

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a Hartford priest who is a theologian at the University of Notre Dame, called Maciel's appointment "a very provocative act done deliberately as an in-your-face response."

But McBrien, author of a new book, "The Lives of the Popes," wondered how much the pope had to do with Maciel and others on the list.

“Whenever you have a pope who has been a forceful leader at the end of his life and with his physical powers reduced, you leave a vacuum, and that gives lower-level bureaucratic types the opportunity to speak in the name of the pope,”McBrien said. “I think this will continue to happen until the end of his pontificate.”

David Clohessy of St. Louis, director of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, a national group with 3,500 members, said of the appointment, “This is crazy.”

“The pope is letting the whole world know that with all the [priests] to choose from, he chose this guy,”Clohessy said. “Nine men made accusations, but no one sued. It's not about money.”

Clohessy said his group was sending a letter to the pope and bishops headed for the synod to protest the Maciel appointment.

Synods have been called regularly by popes since the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 to seek the advice of cardinals and bishops on various topics. Special synods deal with issues of a particular region or nation, the Rev. Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit priest in Washington, D. C., said.

Reese, author of a 1996 book, “Inside the Vatican,”said the Synod for America is in line with others that have been held, such as one for Europe in 1991, Africa in 1994 and Lebanon in 1995.

Caption: Maciel

Memo: Jason Berry, a New Orleans-based writer, is author of the book “Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children,”(Doubleday, 1992; Image paperback, 1994), for which he received a first-place book award in 1993 from the Catholic Press Association.

Visit our Web site for an archive of stories about the accusations against the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado. <http://news.courant.com/jump/padre.stm>

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