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VATICAN SILENT ON SEX ABUSE ALLEGATIONS

Catholic Church authorities remain silent in the wake of allegations by nine men that the head of an international religious order sexually abused them when they were boys and young men training to be priests.

The accused, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder and head of the Legionaries of Christ, categorically denies the charges made by the men, who were his former students in Spain and Italy in the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

As head of a religious order with ministries in 18 countries, Maciel reports directly to the Holy See, the church's central administration headed by Pope John Paul II. Maciel lives at his order's headquarters in Rome.

Only the Holy See can order an investigation into the charges, made public by The Courant in a story Feb. 23.

The complaints raise profound questions about how the Vatican bureaucracy operates and -- depending on whether the matter even crossed his desk -- how Pope John Paul responds when a favored cleric is accused of sexual misconduct.

The issue of sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church has raised the alarm of the hierarchy, priests and faithful in the past decade, particularly in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, Australia and Austria.

In the United States alone since the early 1980s, an estimated 800 priests have been accused of abusing minors, costing the church some \$650 million in legal and medical costs to victims and perpetrators.

The pope **acknowledged the gravity** of the problem in a speech Aug. 14, 1993, in Denver at an international youth conference. He said that he shared "the pain of the suffering and the scandal caused by the sins of some ministers of the altar" and expressed concern "especially for the victims of those crimes."

The pope also encouraged the U.S. bishops in their efforts to develop guidelines to recommend to dioceses in dealing with accusations of sexual misconduct, states a 1996 bishops' report, called "Restoring Trust."

Many U.S. dioceses have instituted tough new procedures to deal with the accusations so they are not covered up as they had been in the past.

But that is not the case in the central bureaucracy surrounding the pope, where the accusations against Maciel apparently have gone unheeded.

No response was ever made to complaints **sent through church channels** to the pope in **1978** and again in **1989** by two priests who said Maciel had abused them when they were boys.

The Holy See appears to remain unmoved.

The chief Vatican spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, did not respond to repeated Courant requests by telephone, letter and fax for comment that began last Nov. 29.

Following the Feb. 23 publication of the accusations, he was again asked to comment by letter and several telephone calls to the Vatican Press Office.

“If there has been no response, there will be none,” a secretary for Navarro-Valls commented Tuesday.

The secretary said that “it is the practice of the Vatican not to comment” on issues of sexual abuse “out of respect” for any civil litigation that might be going on.

But in the case of Maciel's accusers none has filed legal action or sought financial compensation from the Legionaries or the Catholic Church. Many of them remain loyal Catholics and said they are not blaming the religious order or the Catholic Church. They said **all they seek is accountability** by church authorities for what they said was Maciel's sexual misconduct.

Eight of the men making the accusations of sexual abuse, including a priest in Florida, are Mexicans and Mexican Americans who are professionally successful. The ninth was a Spanish-born former Legionary priest and university president who dictated a deathbed statement in **1995** accusing Maciel of molesting him as a youth.

Maciel commented directly on the allegations for the first time in a letter to The Courant, published on March 2. He denied the accusations as “defamations and falsities with no foundation whatsoever” and said he was praying for his accusers.

Previously Maciel made his denials indirectly through a law firm and in a statement from the Rev. Owen Kearns, spokesman for the Legionaries in the United States, which has headquarters in Orange and a seminary in Cheshire.

Kearns described Maciel as the target of a conspiracy by men with “personal vendettas against him” to “fabricate these devastating charges” and destroy his standing.

Among those who say that Maciel abused them are two men who helped to establish the order in the United States.

One is the Rev. Felix Alarcon, 63, of Venice, Fla., who opened the Legion's first U.S. base in the Woodmont section of Milford in **1965**. The other is a former priest, Juan Vaca, 59, of Holbrook, N.Y., who was president of the Legionaries in the United States from **1971 to 1976**.

American church authorities do not want to comment on the allegations.

A secretary for Bishop John F. Kinney of St. Cloud, Minn., chairman of the sexual abuse committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, referred a reporter to the conference's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

A priest who heads the bishops' sexual abuse committee's staff, the Rev. Thomas J. Bevan, did not return a telephone call. A public information aide to the bishops said Bevan was loath to comment in any way.

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