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Page: A1 **Section:** MAIN **Edition:** STATEWIDE **Sources:** Legionarios de Cristo
(50th anniversary history published in 1994); Legionaries World Wide Web home page.

Source: GERALD RENNER, Courant Religion Writer and JASON BERRY, Special to The Courant. 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.

HEAD OF WORLDWIDE CATHOLIC ORDER ACCUSED OF HISTORY OF ABUSE

After decades of silence, nine men have come forward to accuse the head of an international Roman Catholic order of sexually abusing them when they were boys and young men training to be priests.

The men, in interviews in the United States and Mexico, said the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, molested them in Spain and Italy during the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

Several said Maciel told them he had permission from Pope Pius XII to seek them out sexually for relief of physical pain.

Those making the allegations include a priest, guidance counselor, professor, engineer and lawyer. Some of the men, now in their 50s and 60s, wept during the interviews. All said the events still haunt them.

They said they are coming forward now 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."

"The pope has reprimanded Germans for lack of courage during the Nazi era. We are in a similar situation. For years we were silent. Then we tried to reach authorities in the church. This is a statement of conscience," said Jose de J. Barba Martin, one of the men alleging the abuse.

Maciel, who is based in Rome and travels often to Mexico, declined requests for an interview. But the Legionaries issued a lengthy denial on his behalf.

"Each of these allegations is false. Father Maciel has never engaged in sexual relations of any sort with any seminarian or novice, nor has he engaged in any of the other improprieties alleged," stated the Rev. Owen Kearns, the Legionaries' U.S. spokesman, based in Orange, Conn. His 19-

page statement and other documents were provided by the Washington, D.C., office of Kirkland and Ellis, a Chicago law firm.

The Legion statement describes Maciel, now 76, as the target of a conspiracy by men with "personal vendettas against him" to "fabricate these devastating charges" and destroy his standing.

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

None of Maciel's accusers 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.

Founded by Maciel in Mexico in 1941, the Legionaries of Christ is one of the fastest-growing religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church, recruiting boys as young as 10. It reports it has 350 priests and 2,000 seminarians -- double the number of a decade ago -- in 18 countries.

The Legion's U.S. headquarters are in Orange. It has a seminary in Cheshire, where about 200 young men are enrolled for the last two years of high school and a two-year novitiate program. Neither school is implicated in the accusations involving Maciel.

The order specializes in education. Besides its seminaries, it runs prep schools in Latin America, Europe and the United States, a university in Mexico City and schools for the poor in Mexico. Kearns said the order also carries out food distribution programs and promotes urban and rural development in Latin America.

The *Courant* learned of the sexual abuse allegations against Maciel after publishing articles last year about the order's buying two national Catholic weekly newspapers -- the *National Catholic Register* and *Twin Circle*. The stories went into the Legion's fund-raising tactics and strict discipline in its seminary training. Three men said they had to flee novitiate training in a seminary in New Castle, N.Y., when their requests to leave were ignored.

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. 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, Conn., 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.

In response, the Legion's law firm produced letters from four Mexican laymen -- two who work for the order in Mexico and one who had worked for Maciel's brother -- who say that the accusers tried to enlist them in a scheme to discredit Maciel with false accusations.

“They are lying in a pitiful way out of loyalty to Father Maciel,” said Barba, 57, a Harvard-educated literary scholar at one of Mexico's leading universities, the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México. Barba said that Maciel sexually abused him as a teenage seminarian in Rome in July 1955.

Only hours before publication, after The Courant told Maciel's law firm it would publish the article today, the law firm notified The Courant that a 10th man who had alleged abuse by Maciel retracted earlier statements. Those statements were made in an interview in November and a detailed sworn affidavit he had given in January.

Miguel Díaz Rivera, 62, of Oaxaca in south central Mexico, said in a second affidavit signed 15 days ago that he had been encouraged by former Legionaries to make the allegations. A professor and former Legionary priest, Díaz now denies knowledge of sexual misconduct by Maciel.

Most of the other accusers had provided affidavits in support of their allegations against Maciel. None of the others has been retracted.

Maciel weathered a Vatican investigation between 1956 and 1958, during which he was suspended from his duties as head of the Legion. The record of the investigation presumably lies in secret Vatican archives.

James F. Basile, an attorney with the Legion's law firm, said Maciel was reinstated after being cleared of accusations that he abused drugs, misused money and engaged in other improprieties -- which did not include sexual misconduct.

Initiation ritual

The men making the allegations of sexual abuse today say they were not among those who complained about Maciel in the 1950s. In fact, they said, they were young seminarians at the time who hotly defended the order's superior general, whom they were taught to call “Nuestro Padre” -- Our Father.

The accusers said that Maciel molested more than 30 boys from the 1940s through at least the early 1960s. Several said he maintained a long-term sexual relationship with them.

Separate accounts of a similar sexual initiation went like this: Maciel would summon a boy to his room at night and be in his bed, writhing in apparent pain, and ask the boy to rub his stomach. The session would typically end in mutual masturbation.

Alarcon, the priest in Florida, said Maciel took advantage of him “when I was very small and very young.”

The Courant spoke with Alarcon after he had been named by others as among those who were victimized as boys by Maciel. Alarcon confirmed the reports.

Alarcon left the Legionaries in 1966 to become a parish priest in the Long Island, N.Y., Diocese of Rockville Centre. He has been detached from the diocese to minister among Hispanics in Florida.

Vaca, the former president of the Legionaries in the United States, entered the order at Maciel's invitation when he was 10 years old in Mexico. He said the superior general began molesting him two years later when he was taken to a seminary in Spain. He said he endured a psychosexual relationship for a dozen years, into adulthood, that he is still struggling to understand.

In 1976 Vaca wrote a detailed letter to Maciel, with a list of 20 victims, which he says he hand-delivered to the Legion founder in Mexico City to explain why he was quitting the order. "Everything you did contradicts the beliefs of the church and the order," Vaca wrote.

Maciel, he said, tried to persuade him to remain in the order, while refusing to confront his reasons for leaving. Kearns, the Legionaries' spokesman, said in his statement that Vaca is seeking revenge because he was incompetent in his job and was being demoted. Vaca disputes that claim but acknowledges that despondency over years of abuse had affected his ministry.

In 1978, Vaca said, he gave a copy of his 1976 letter to Bishop John R. McGann of Rockville Centre, Long Island, who had accepted him as a parish priest. He said McGann forwarded the letter, along with a corroborating letter from Alarcon and other documents, to the Vatican.

Monsignor John A. Alesandro, a diocesan canon lawyer who handled Vaca's case for the bishop, confirmed that the documents were sent to Rome in 1978, as well as a 1989 letter from Vaca to Pope John Paul II, when he decided to leave the priesthood.

"All I can say is that there are different levels where people are informed about this. It was our duty to get this stuff into the right hands. I don't know why it was not acted on. . . . It's a substantive allegation that should have been acted on," the canon lawyer said.

Alarcon said, "Nothing ever came of it. It's amazing. . . . There are big people in Rome who are avoiding this."

A spiritual army

The Mexicans making the allegations were known in the Legion as "the apostolic schoolboys," because they had been trained in the order's strict disciplinary ways from the time they were as young as 10. Americans and Irishmen who joined the Legion in late adolescence said in interviews that they felt like "second-class citizens" compared with Maciel's favored "apostolic schoolboys." They said they were unaware of the Mexicans' allegations of abuse.

According to the official Legionaries' history, Maciel started his religious order on Jan. 3, 1941, when he was a 20-year-old theology student and took charge of the schooling of a group of boys who were 12 and 13 years old.

That was after he had left two seminaries -- in Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1938 and a Jesuit-run seminary in Montezuma, New Mexico, in 1940 -- for what the official history calls "misunderstandings" about his desire to start a religious order.

But one of Maciel's uncles, Bishop Francesco Gonzalez Arias of Cuernavaca, Mexico, oversaw his training and ordained him a priest on Nov. 26, 1944. He was 24, a young age for a priest, especially one who had failed to finish training in two seminaries.

The idea for a “spiritual army” came naturally to Maciel, who was born March 10, 1920, into a large family, originally from France. He grew up nurtured on war stories.

Four of his uncles were bishops and one was a general. The former Legionaries remember he had enthralled them with stories of how the general fought to defend the church during the Mexican Civil War, in which many members of the clergy were murdered. The war ended in 1920 but persecutions of priests continued into the 1930s, until an authoritarian one-party rule emerged.

Many Mexicans considered the church a spiritual refuge that had prevailed over violence. Moreover, the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s had been won by Gen. Francisco Franco, a Catholic who had pledged to restore the monarchy. Franco governed Spain as a dictator and was admired by conservative Mexicans.

By various accounts a brilliant fund-raiser, Maciel cultivated wealthy patrons in Mexico and, in time, Spain as well, by impressing donors with his program of moral rectitude in a quasi-military order.

He managed to raise 200,000 pesos, a substantial sum in those days, to begin his religious order. He first called it the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Then he changed it to the Legionaries of the Pope, and finally settled on the Legionaries of Christ.

By 1948 Maciel had established a Legion seminary in a mansion in Tlalpan, a suburb south of Mexico City. Tall trees surrounded the estate, which had a large swimming pool and picturesque lake. Sometimes Maciel mingled, playing marbles or passing leisure time with older boys.

But he had no casual agenda. The boys were told that Maciel was a living saint, on a personal crusade against communism on behalf of the holy father in Rome.

In the late '40s the Legion expanded into Spain, by arranging for the older students to study philosophy at the Jesuits' University of Comillas in the northern province of Santander.

But Maciel's penchant for trying to recruit other seminarians to join the Legion is said to have led to friction with the Jesuits, who severed ties with him. The Legionaries studied at a nearby monastery until the early 1950s, when Maciel found a location at Ontaneda, in Santander province, where the seminary has operated ever since. From Ontaneda, where the seminarians study philosophy, they advance to major theological studies in Rome.

In recruiting boys for the order, many of the former Legionaries interviewed said, Maciel had an obsession with light-haired, fair-skinned youth. Vaca said when Maciel sent him to Spain in 1963, “my instructions were to get the prettiest and smartest kids.”

An extra vow

The Legionaries pledged total fidelity to the pope and took the traditional three vows that members of other religious orders do -- of poverty, chastity and obedience. They took a fourth one as well: They swore never to speak ill of the Legion, Maciel or their superiors -- and to inform on anyone who did.

The former Legionaries remember being taught that women were temptresses and masturbation a mortal sin. In an art encyclopedia at the Spanish seminary, the plate of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and other works depicting the unclothed feminine form were covered by dark paper with Scotch tape.

The countryside was beautiful and the classical curriculum a boon to boys with a scholarly bent. Many boys formed friendships that lasted long after they departed.

The boys were told that if they left the Legion, their souls would literally go to hell: "Lost vocation, sure damnation" was the phrase that moved many of them to remain, years after wanting to leave. Eventually, some of those who said they had been abused sought out therapists to cope with traumatic memories.

They watched films celebrating Franco and heard stories of Nuestro Padre's heroic fight against debilitating illnesses.

Disciplinary standards were medieval. To ward off impure thoughts, the former Legionaries said, they were given the "cilicio," a leather strap studded with chain hooks to wrap around their thighs.

"The needles entered my flesh and caused great pain," one former seminarian recalled, "yet my bad thoughts pursued me still."

At night, they recalled, dormitory silence was torn by sound bursts of boys striking their own backs with whips as punishment for their sins.

As described by the men, it was a culture in which one's every moment was to be accounted for, not just in seminary but throughout their lives as priests -- a system of total control. Incoming and outgoing mail was monitored and they had no access to telephones. The oath to inform on anyone speaking ill of Nuestro Padre or his Legion meant they were expected to spy on one another, they said.

Contact with their families was severely curtailed. Juan Vaca said that for "12 years I was kept in Europe away from my parents and family. I was not allowed to see them or keep close contact with them."

The former Legionaries said punishment was harsh. Fernando Perez Olvera, 62, an engineer in Mexico, said that he was 14 when he recoiled from sexual advances Maciel made. He said he began breaking rules to get himself expelled.

One time, he said, Maciel "locked me in a room with one bed and a night table, and one window that had to remain closed. . . . It was very hard in that jail." The solitary confinement lasted a month, he recalled. "If I had been there for a longer time, I would have lost my mind."

Another time, he said, Maciel told him to pack, and ordered him to walk to the railroad station miles away. He left in midmorning and arrived there at 7 p.m., tired and hungry. He had no money and by 11 p.m. felt desperate and alone when Maciel arrived in a car and took him back to the seminary. Shortly thereafter he was expelled and returned to Mexico by ship.

Several years later, in the mid-'50s, Perez's younger brother, Jose Antonio Perez Olvera, was summoned to Maciel's room, where the founder expressed concern for Fernando's health.

"He said my brother masturbated frequently and it was urgent to take him away from this sin," said Jose Antonio Perez, 59, who is now a lawyer in Mexico City.

"I didn't know what to think. I had not spoken of this with my brother," he said. Maciel, Jose Antonio continued, told him that he needed a sample of his semen to send to a famous doctor in Madrid, whose analysis would help remedy his brother's problem. The former seminarian said he was bewildered, but submitted as Maciel fondled him to orgasm, put the semen in a flask and said soothingly, "The purpose was right."

Then, he said, Maciel told him to receive Holy Communion and "never tell anyone of this heroic act."

"The details of my violation could prove to be funny if they had not been derived from the tremendous tragedy to me," Jose Antonio said.

Having entered the Legion at 10, he believed "chastity was the No. 1 virtue." He likened the experience with Maciel to "being deflowered" and said it made him feel he was "an accomplice."

Suffering from insomnia and anxiety, he kept his distance from Maciel until he left the order at age 25.

Today, Jose Antonio Perez views the self-flagellating by seminarians as "a form of psychological transference" -- punishing themselves for Maciel's sins.

Papal dispensation

Arturo Jurado Guzman, 58, who teaches at the U.S. Defense Department School of Linguistics in Monterey, Calif., entered the Legion at 11. He says he was 16 when Maciel summoned him to his bedside.

In a darkened room, he said, Maciel was moaning with pain he attributed to abdominal problems. "He told me to put my hand on his stomach and start massaging," Jurado said with a sigh. Maciel told him "to go lower and lower," coaxing the teenager to masturbate him, while the priest began fondling Jurado.

"He said that he had a personal dispensation from Pope Pius XII to do these sexual acts because of his pain," Jurado said.

He submitted to Maciel's designs about 40 times, Jurado said, and when he resisted Maciel's attempts at anal penetration, Maciel summoned another boy.

Vaca, who would rise to be head of the order in the United States, said that his first sexual encounter was under similar circumstances. Afterward, he said, "I told him I didn't feel right. I wanted to go to confession. He said, 'There is nothing wrong. You don't have to go to confession.'"

Vaca recalls that when his dismay did not melt away, Maciel said, "Here, I will give you absolution" -- and made the sign of the cross.

Alejandro Espinosa Alcala, 59, a Legion seminarian in the early 1950s who today is a rancher in rural Mexico, said Maciel would sometimes bring him and another boy together in bed for mutual masturbation. "I could not fight my natural repugnancies," Espinosa reflected.

Maciel assured him that the activity was "morally correct," he said, because he was only acting as a "technical nurse" and that the priest had received special papal permission to use boys, not women, in that role.

One who said he resisted Maciel's sexual advances was Saul Barrales Arellano, 62, who has taught in Catholic schools in Mexico for many years since leaving the Legion. As a seminarian, he was known as "the charitable one" by his peers, who thought his kindness would make him a natural priest.

Barrales said that Maciel "asked me to manipulate him sexually five or 10 times and I refused." Barrales said he would lie across the doorway of the bedroom when Maciel drifted off to sleep, to keep out others who he feared might be more willing to do Maciel's bidding.

The former Legionaries said that Maciel seemed to dissociate himself from the sexual acts, separating the bedroom encounters from his priestly activities.

To some he never acknowledged that anything unusual had happened. Barba, the literary scholar, said that after a sexual encounter with Maciel, the priest calmly dressed and walked with the youth to bless an outdoor lunch under blue skies.

"Fundamentally, Maciel's case is one of a divided personality," said Miguel Diaz, in his initial statements.

Maciel claimed to be "suffering from a disease," Diaz had said before his retraction, "that caused him to retain sperm in his testicles, causing him insufferable pain that could only be relieved with a specific drug . . . or through masturbation, which he asked me to perform on several occasions and which I obviously did."

Questions of drug use

Maciel's medical history has been a source of curiosity to the men who say he sexually abused them. Each one said Maciel was addicted to painkilling drugs despite his being cleared of that accusation in the Vatican investigation.

In Rome, Jurado said, he was dispatched to Salvator Mundi hospital on a dozen occasions to obtain morphine. Under orders from Maciel, Jurado said, "I gave him injections many times in the forearm."

Barrales, "the charitable one" who said he resisted the sexual advances, said that he was dispatched, usually by car, to Isola Tiberina, a hospital on a small isle in the Tiber River, to obtain drugs. If refused there, Barrales said, the driver would head to another hospital.

“We were living in a world with a lack of knowledge. I would go to drugstores to ask for the drugs but they wouldn't give them to me because they were forbidden. When I went to hospitals run by nuns, some of them would give me the drugs to take to Maciel,” said Barrales.

`The War'

The Legion's official history, published in 1995, makes no reference to the Vatican investigation of Maciel between 1956 and 1958. Legionaries refer to it as the time of “The War.”

In the fall of 1956, they recall, a distraught Maciel tearfully told his seminarians in Rome that he had to show his obedience to the pope, even though mistaken Vatican officials were investigating him. With Maciel suspended as superior, confusion spread: How could Nuestro Padre be in trouble with Pope Pius XII, who had approved the Legion as a Roman Catholic order?

Maciel went to Villa Linda, a hospital outside Rome. Statements from three physicians, two dated in October 1956 and one undated, provided by the Legion through its law firm, say that Maciel was in good health and specifically had no drug problem.

Nevertheless, the former Legionaries insist that Maciel was, indeed, addicted to painkilling drugs, despite what the doctors wrote. Ironically, it was the realization of his addiction that softened their attitudes toward his sexual abuse of them, they said.

The ex-Legionaries recall a fearful moral drama at the time in which they had to balance years of seminary study against the interests of Maciel.

Jurado, the Defense Department language instructor, said that the seminary headmaster in Rome told the seminarians the Vatican investigators were “evil people, of bad intentions,” and that the boys did not have to tell the truth.

“We were all very nervous,” recalled Barba, the literary scholar. “If the pope was the ultimate head of the Legion, how could we believe that he sent men with bad intentions? [The rector] told me, ‘Do whatever your conscience dictates.’”

When asked by an investigator what he thought of Maciel, Barba recalls replying, “He is a saint” – as the seminarians had been told for years. The priest asked why. Barba referred to Maciel's suffering in the infirmary. Under more pointed questioning, said Barba: “I retreated, I was scared. . . I didn't tell him about my experiences.”

Jurado said he, too, lied. “For me it was obedience.”

The pressure on the apostolic schoolboys was enormous. To those nearing ordination, admitting sexual activity could wreck the priestly life they had pursued through the years from Mexico to Spain, and now Rome. Blowing the whistle on Maciel could bring down others before their ordinations.

Vaca said, “We were told there are these enemies of God who were out to get Maciel. I denied drug abuse and I made a big defense and praise of Father Maciel.” He said he was asked no further questions.

In interviews, the former Legionaries said they assumed that the 1956 accusations involved sexual molestation. They said they are surprised now to hear differently from the only one of the four Vatican investigators said to be still alive.

In a letter provided by the Legionaries' law firm, dated Dec. 12, 1996, retired Bishop Polidoro Van Vlieberghe of Illapel, Chile, wrote that he found "all of the charges raised against Father Maciel at that time were meritless."

The bishop said the charges in the 1950s were "part of a methodically organized campaign to discredit Father Maciel and the Legionaries of Christ."

In his letter, Van Vlieberghe lays the blame on two of Maciel's clerical subordinates. In a supporting document, undated but presumably written about 1958, the bishop said two Mexican bishops and the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits – "for unspeakable reasons" – supported the accusations.

Van Vlieberghe said no allegations of sexual abuse were made, despite a "searching" inquiry in which Legion members had "every opportunity to level any accusation."

However, Jose Antonio Perez, the Mexico City lawyer who said Maciel collected a sample of his semen, recalls that an investigator asked him only one pointed question: "At any point did Father Maciel do anything improper to you and ask you not to tell anyone, not even under confession?" My response was a firm 'No.' I was very proud of my fidelity to Father Maciel."

When he put his hand on the Bible and lied, Perez continued, "I sacrificed myself for him. Internally I feel I was excommunicated." He said he was so dedicated to Maciel, to whom he felt he owed everything, he was proud to protect him.

Why now?

In the ensuing years it has taken them to remake their lives, the men say they were too frightened to accuse Maciel. The Vatican had exonerated him, and with the power and influence Maciel wielded, they feared no one would believe them.

Their fears of Maciel stemmed from a bank of personal experiences that, they say, took them years to overcome.

Even while he was suspended during the Vatican investigation, the men say, no one doubted that Maciel still ran the Legion, despite the presence of an interim superior.

In 1957, with the Vatican investigation in high gear, Barrales, "the charitable one," said that Maciel sent him to the Canary Islands so that he could not give testimony to the Vatican investigators. Nine months later, Maciel expelled him from the order, just short of ordination. Barrales said he was depressed for a year and could not admit to his parents what he had endured in the Legion.

Arturo Jurado, the language instructor from California, said that he was abruptly demoted from studies in Rome and sent back to Spain. Not long after that, he left. Barba left in 1962 of his own accord. As the years passed, other men left as well.

But in the early 1990s, they watched sexual abuse by members of the clergy become an issue in the North American and European media, as victims began to speak out publicly and criticize church leaders who recycled known pedophiles to new parish assignments.

Another galvanizing factor, they say, was a letter from Pope John Paul II to Maciel, praising him as “an efficacious guide to youth” – a letter reproduced as a half-page advertisement on Dec. 5, 1994, in Mexico City's largest newspapers, accompanied by a photograph of Maciel kissing the pope's ring. The ad celebrated Maciel's 50th anniversary as a priest.

The Legionaries are esteemed in Rome. The pope presided at the ordination of 60 new Legionary priests in 1991 and praised Maciel for loyalty to the papacy. Maciel accompanied the pope on two of his North American trips.

The former Legionaries say they were convinced that a direct appeal to the pope for a new investigation would not work because of Vaca's futile experience.

Letters to the pope

Despite two letters to the pope, in 1978 and 1989, in which he complained about his having been sexually abused by Maciel, Vaca never got a response. His 1978 letter, sent to the Vatican by the Diocese of Rockville Centre, was backed up with a supporting letter from Alarcon, who said he also had been abused.

Years later, when Vaca decided to leave the priesthood and marry, he wrote Pope John Paul II, in a letter dated Oct. 28, 1989, requesting formal dispensation from his priestly vows. He again discussed the “years of being sexually and psychologically abused” by Maciel, giving specific details going back to 1949 in Cobreces, Spain.

Maciel “started to abuse me sexually in the same way I soon realized he was doing to other seminarians,” the letter to the pope stated.

In an interview at his home in Holbrook, N.Y., Vaca said that although the pope ignored his allegations against Maciel, he did receive a two-page document in Latin in 1993, signed by a Vatican cardinal, granting his request to leave the priesthood and marry. He had already married in a civil ceremony but he then had a church wedding, at which Auxiliary Bishop James J. Daly of Rockville Centre officiated.

Vaca works as a guidance counselor in a community college. He remains an observant Catholic and lives with his wife and 2-year-old daughter in a modest Cape home appointed with religious paintings and statues.

Alesandro, the Rockville Centre canon lawyer, said that confidentiality prevents him from talking specifically about Vaca's appeal, but that he follows the same procedure set by canon law in every case.

Along with whatever documents the petitioner wishes to submit to make his case, he said, Bishop McGann writes a recommendation.

“Transmittal goes through the nunciature [in Washington, D.C.] for protection, in a diplomatic pouch to Rome. Then they send a card saying they got it and they send a protocol number,” or case number.

The Vatican acknowledged receipt of Vaca's petition, he said.

The Vatican had no response to inquiries from The Courant about why no investigation followed the allegations made by Vaca and Alarcon. Informed by The Courant through faxes of the nature of the complaints, Archbishop John J. Foley, an American in charge of “social communications” for the Vatican, replied that the faxes “have been forwarded to the appropriate authorities.”

The archbishop said he also sent copies to the Vatican press office, which is responsible for responding to journalists. But Navarro-Valls, director of the press office, did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

A deathbed testament

Perhaps the most poignant account of Maciel's critics is that of Juan Manuel Fernandez Amenabar, a Legion priest who in the early 1980s served as president of the Legionaries' Northern Anahuac University in Mexico City.

In 1984 Fernandez left his position and quit the priesthood. A Spaniard by birth, he spent time in San Diego and headed back to Mexico. One day in May 1991, he hobbled into the Spanish Hospital in Mexico City, dazed from a stroke, his speech impeded.

As Fernandez began rehabilitation, a young physician in her residency, Dr. Gabriela Quintero Calleja, became a friend in the course of treating him. Sometimes, after making her rounds, she sat by his bed and read poetry to him. Quintero said that for the last three years of Fernandez's life, she was closer to him than anyone else. He confided his life story to her, she said, including how Maciel “on three occasions sexually abused Juan Manuel [Fernandez], the first two occasions at the age of 16 years of age and the third at 17 years.”

On Jan. 6, 1995, his health failing, Fernandez dictated a statement about his experiences, with several former Legionaries as witnesses. He attested that Maciel “tried to justify this use of drugs and the above-mentioned sexual abuse to me, and as I learned later, to other religious men and novitiates who were his victims, by saying that he had a ‘disease’ and that he had direct permission from His Holiness Pope Pius XII. . . .”

Kearns, the Legionaries' spokesman, disputes that Fernandez could have made any rational judgment in his last days because he had suffered a stroke that impaired his ability to speak or write. In support, he provided a letter from Raul de Anda Gomez, whom he described as Fernandez's “physician.” De Anda suggested that the dying man “was a possible victim of persons without principles.”

But de Anda is a psychotherapist, not a medical doctor, and Fernandez was not his patient, Dr. Quintero said. In an interview in Mexico City, she told The Courant that Fernandez “made his declaration in full use of his mental faculties.” Francisca Toffano Del Rio, a psychologist who was among the hospital team who attended to Fernandez, supported Quintero's evaluation.

Quintero said de Anda visited Fernandez three or four times in the hospital. The first time she met him, she said, de Anda accompanied Maciel, who tried to talk Fernandez into going to Spain with him for medical care.

With artful manners, Quintero said, Maciel suggested that she, too, might wish to accompany Fernandez and study in Spain under the Legion's auspices. She and Fernandez declined.

When Maciel and de Anda left the room, the patient told the doctor: “Watch him[Maciel]. He is a fox.”

In a written statement Quintero gave The Courant, she said it was her “desire to reveal the truth that has been kept hidden for so many years, since so many members of the Catholic Church as well as the society as a whole seem ignorant of the moral character of Father Marcial Maciel Degollado.”

Caption: PHOTO 1: Denies wrong-doing

* The Rev. Marcial Maciel Delgollado, leader of the Legionaries of Christ, denies through his religious order that he has ever had sexual relations of any sort with any of the boys in his charge or engaged in any of the other improprieties alleged.

PHOTO 2: The Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado receives an award in recognition of his humanitarian work in the field of education at a dinner on Dec. 19, 1996, in Mexico City. Making the presentation, right, is Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, founder of the Amparo Foundation, which sponsored the dinner.

GRAPHIC: THE ACCUSERS

The Rev. Felix Alarcon, 63, of Venice, Fla., who opened the Legion's first U.S. base in the Woodmont section of Milford, Conn., in 1965.

Professor Jose de J. Barba Martin, 57, a Harvard-educated literary scholar who teaches at the Instituto Tecnological Autonomo de Mexico, Mexico City.

Saul Barrales Arellano, 62, Catholic school teacher, Mexico City.

Alejandro Espinosa Alcala, 59, rancher, rural Mexico.

Juan Manuel Fernandez Amenabar, left statement before he died Feb. 7, 1995; former Legionary priest and president of the Northern Anahuac University in Mexico City.

Arturo Jurado Guzman, 58, instructor, U.S. Defense Department School of Linguistics, Monterey, Calif.

Fernando Perez Olvera, 62, engineer, Monterey, Mexico.

Jose Antonio Perez Olvera, 59, lawyer, Mexico City.

Juan Vaca, 59, of Holbrook, N.Y., college guidance counselor, president of the Legionaries in the United States from 1971 to 1976.

THE ACCUSED

The Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, 76, founder and superior general, Legionaries of Christ, Rome.

THE DEFENDERS

The Rev. Owen Kearns, spokesman, Legionaries of Christ in the United States, Orange, Conn.

Armando Arias Sanchez, lay employee, Legionaries, Mexico City.

Jorge Luis Gonzalez Limon, lay employee, Legionaries, Mexico City.

Valente Velazquez Camarena, layman, Guadalajara.

Juan Manuel Correa Cuellar, businessman, Mexico City.

Bishop Polidoro Van Vlieberghe, retired, former Vatican investigator, Illapel, Chile.

MAP: A worldwide presence

* From its founding in Mexico in 1941 by 20-year-old theology student Marcial Maciel, the Legionaries of Christ has grown into a religious order of 350 priests and 2,000 seminarians – double the number of a decade ago – in 18 countries, double the number of a decade ago. About 40 of the priests are in the United States.

The order has a major presence in Connecticut, including headquarters in Orange, a minor seminary in Cheshire, and a center in Hamden where it publishes two national Catholic newspapers and carries on direct mail fundraising operations.

It operates “apostolic” boarding schools for younger boys in Center Harbor, N.H., and Edgerton, Wis. In Westchester County, N.Y., the order has a new novitiate on a 100-acre estate in New Castle and a family center in Rye. In Mount Pleasant, the order purchased from IBM a 264-acre conference center assessed at \$40 million.

In Rhode Island the Legionaries operate two boarding schools, one for Latin American girls in Warwick, the other for English-speaking girls in Greenville. An “international formation center” in Wakefield trains lay supporters in an organization called Regnum Christi, Latin for Kingdom of Christ.

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