

Archbishop O'Brien raises concerns about Legion of Christ

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Concerned that the Legion of Christ stifles the free will of its members and lacks transparency, Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien told the religious order's director general that he cannot in good conscience recommend that anyone join the Legion or Regnum Christi, its affiliated lay movement.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Legion of Christ is affiliated with Woodmont Academy in Cooksville. Regnum Christi is also active in several parishes.

The archbishop's action came in the wake of revelations that Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legion of Christ, fathered a daughter while serving as leader of the international religious order.

Pope Benedict XVI had previously removed the Mexican priest from public ministry in 2006, asking him to lead a life of prayer and penance after Father Maciel faced allegations of sexual abuse of seminarians and financial irregularities.

"It seems to me and many others that this was a man with an entrepreneurial genius who, by systematic deception and duplicity, used our faith to manipulate others for his own selfish ends," Archbishop O'Brien told The Catholic Review in a telephone interview following his Feb. 20 Rome meeting with Father Alvaro Corcuera, director general of the Legion.

"Father Maciel deserves our prayers, as every Christian who dies does, that he'll be forgiven and we leave the final judgment to God as to what his life and death amounted to," Archbishop O'Brien said.

Saying that the Legion's founder "leaves many victims in his wake," the archbishop called for the "full disclosure of his activities and those who are complicit in them or

knew of them and of those who are still refusing to offer disclosure.”

He added that the finances of the order should be opened to “objective scrutiny.”

Archbishop O’Brien said he has grave concerns that the Legion fosters a “cult of personality” focused on Father Maciel.

“While it’s difficult to get a hold of official documents,” Archbishop O’Brien said, “it’s clear that from the first moment a person joins the Legion, efforts seem to be made to program each one and to gain full control of his behavior, of all information he receives, of his thinking and emotions.”

The archbishop said many members who leave the order suffer “deep psychological distress for dependency and need prolonged counseling akin to deprogramming.”

Saying that “I know that there are good priests in the movement” and acknowledging that Legion members are in full accord with the theological teachings of the church, the archbishop also said some of the practices of the movement are unhealthy.

“This is not about orthodoxy,” he said. “It is about respect for human dignity for each of its members.”

The archbishop noted that he has heard reports that the movement claims that the first duty of a Legionary is to love the Legion.

Such policies subject a person’s use of reason not to one’s own judgment, Archbishop O’Brien said, but to a spiritual director.

“It’s been said that the founder is alone called ‘nuestro padre’ (‘our father’) and that no one else can have that title,” Archbishop O’Brien said. “All are bound to identify with him in his spirit, his mind, his mission and in his life. This would suggest that the very basis of the Legion movement should be reviewed from start to finish.”

Scott Brown, executive director of the Woodmont Academy, declined to comment and referred questions to Jim Fair, a U.S. spokesman for the Legion who said that revelations about Father Maciel have been a “great shock” and “great

disappointment” to members, but that the order has achieved “very positive things” for the church.

“We’re processing that mystery, that the Holy Spirit could use what was very clearly a flawed instrument to do good,” Mr. Fair said. “The Holy Spirit does that with all of us. We think it did it with Father Maciel. So while this is certainly disappointing, we have a charism that is approved by the church and we’ll continue to work on behalf of the church on our various apostolic works.”

The spokesman said the Legion is interested in working with the Vatican to address concerns about the movement.

“We’ll be double-checking our policies and procedures to ensure that we’re in a good position to ensure the integrity of the group,” he said.

Mr. Fair said he hoped the Legion will be able to prove to Archbishop O’Brien that “we have some value that would help his ministries and the archdiocese.”

Last summer, Archbishop O’Brien was on the verge of asking the Legion and Regnum Christi to leave the archdiocese. He wrote a June letter to the order’s leader asking that a liaison be appointed who would inform the archbishop of all of the Legion’s activities within the archdiocese. He also asked for more transparency of Regnum Christi programs and for the order to stop giving spiritual direction to minors.

“As far as we can judge, they are responding well to our requests,” Archbishop O’Brien told The Catholic Review, “but these larger questions are looming ever more threateningly.”

Father Maciel founded the Legion of Christ in 1941. He died Jan. 30, 2008, at the age of 87.

Paul McMullen contributed to this story.