

Father Marcial Maciel • Founder, Legion of Christ

September 2010

“Christ Our King!” . . .

. . . “Thy Kingdom Come!”

(5:20 AM Wakeup Salutation & Community Response – Regnum Christi)

This essay was prompted by an online Associated Press story entitled “Vatican probes disgraced order’s cultish lay group”. (AP – 9/25/10 by Nicole Winfield).

I know something about Catholic religious orders, not only because I am a fifteen year veteran of a monastic religious order (1949-1965), but in subsequent careers, I had a great deal of interaction with them relating to service for the poor and advocacy for the powerless.

The use of the word “cultish” in the AP headline piqued my interest. There is a great deal of media interest in the concept of “cults” – perhaps for no other reason than the word sounds dangerous or creepy, or dresses up a story that sells. Let me say right up front: one person’s cult is another’s religion. All religious groups manifest cult-like qualities, some more than others for sure, and some even to extremes, but it is always present. Outsiders look in and shout cult, insiders look out and say this is my religion. Let me also state that movements or causes – farmworker, civil rights, tea party, black power, pro-life, polygamy, gay and lesbian, pro-choice, militia, the list goes on and

on, also exhibit cult-like characteristics – again, some more, some less. Outsiders look in and shout extremists or fanatics, insiders look out and say this is our cause, we have rights!

Who is the disgraced order mentioned in the AP headline? That would be the Legion of Christ (founded 1941) and apparently it is “disgraced” because its founder, Father Marcial Maciel, was a drug abuser, a pedophile, a plagiarist, and a financial schemer. He fathered perhaps as many as six children (sexually abused at least two of them) and supported his “families” with funds raised for the Legion. In short, Father Maciel was a fraud and lived a lie.

And yet, in the Catholic Church era of post- Vatican Council II (1965) when religious and priestly vocations have been reduced to barely a trickle, the Legion of Christ has flourished! In 2010 the Legion is actively working in twenty-two (22) countries (including: Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Ireland, France, Germany, United States and Canada) and has 800 priests and 2500 seminarians. The Legion has built schools, seminaries, universities, etc. Imagine! And more than that: Regnum Christi, a Catholic lay ecclesial movement founded in 1959 by the Legion of Christ, has 70,000 members worldwide. Their motto is: “Love Christ, Serve People, Build the Church”.

You have heard the age-old expression, “God writes straight with crooked lines.” If this is true, the line of the Legion of Christ has to be the straightest in recorded history because the line that Father Maciel drew was the most crooked of them all!

It is difficult to overstate the case. Not even taking into account whether or not Father Maciel was a legitimately ordained priest – having been previously dismissed from two seminaries as a young man, one has to question this – but there is no doubt that he was charismatic, a gifted organizer, a prodigious fundraiser, an embezzler, a plagiarist, a sexual predator and a drug addict. As the Legion of Christ grew, it became a worldwide multi-million dollar fundraising apparatus to support not only the good works of the order but also to buy influence and protection from Vatican officials – no, not bribes exactly, but a generous provider of personal goods and services and financial support to those who might be helpful.

In fact, Father Maciel became such a revered and close friend of Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), that when eight former minor seminarians from the Legion of Christ who had been sexually abused by Father Maciel, tried to bring canonical charges against him, Pope John Paul refused to allow it. Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) who was in charge of such legal matters told the seminarians: “I am very sorry, but it isn’t prudent (to bring charges) . . . Father Maciel is “very beloved by the pope and has done a lot of good for the church.” What an eternal shame! These men will never receive the justice due them – not even be granted their day in a Vatican court, because Father Maciel had purchased protection insurance. Put another way: his influence with the pope created what church officials deemed was necessary human collateral damage in order to preserve the good name and reputation of the church’s priestly caste.

However, the 65 year-long lie would soon be over. Shortly before the death of Pope John Paul, Father Maciel, age 83, resigned as head of the Legion of Christ – he knew

what lie ahead. After Pope Benedict's election, the pope – privately! – ordered Maciel to sever all relationship with the Legion of Christ and to live a life of prayer and penitence. This would be akin to a local parish priest hearing grade school confessions and granting absolution with the penance: “say three Hail Mary’s and sin no more.” No public explanation was given, and if you can believe this, no explanation was provided to the members of the Legion of Christ or Regnum Christi about why the pope removed and exiled Father Maciel. Perhaps it wasn’t necessary because the religious superiors in charge of the orders probably had known for decades about their founder’s double life. Mercifully, he died three years later in Houston Texas.

According to church teaching, all sins are forgivable, but some are judged to be more serious than others – telling a white lie is not the same moral failing as murdering your neighbor. Using the case study of Father Marcial Maciel – on a moral scale of sinfulness – how would you rank Maciel’s sins of addiction, embezzlement, pedophilia and plagiarism compared to the church’s sins of pedophilia cover-up, protection of the wrong doer, influence peddling, and denying a canonical hearing to the victims of Maciel’s sex abuse who seek justice?