

Thy Kingdom come!

Prot. V.G. 1351-2013/11

** Translation from Spanish original*

December 5, 2013

To the Legionaries of Christ

Dear fathers and brothers,

The announcement that the territorial director of North America made today confronts us with the painful and horrifying reality of sexual abuse of minors by members of our congregation. Now that we are preparing for the general chapter, I think it would be good for one and all to know what we have done as a congregation in this field and the principles that guide the actions of the Legion in the prevention of sexual abuse and in responding to allegations made against any of our brothers.

When we confront the reality of sexual abuse, it is helpful to keep certain complementary values in mind: compassion and solidarity with the victims, the responsibility to protect people who are under our pastoral care, the right of the accused to a due process, the promotion and defense of justice, and – keeping in mind that sexual abuse is a behavior that will never be tolerated – mercy and support of our brothers who are guilty of this crime. Finally, we should see this from the point of view of Christ, who is capable of making all things new. The last word belongs, not to evil, but to him.

In this letter, I will offer an overview of what we have done in our ongoing struggle to prevent and eradicate any risk of sexual abuse of minors.

1. The seriousness of sexual abuse and the suffering of victims
2. Actions undertaken by the authorities of the congregation
3. Summary of the diagnosis regarding responses to accusations
4. The principles that guide us in the struggle against sexual abuse of minors
5. Recommendations for a Christian response to the phenomenon of sexual abuse

1. Fully understand the seriousness of sexual abuse and the suffering of victims

Sexual abuse, especially when committed by a priest or a consecrated person, is a terrible evil that has tragic consequences for the victims and their families. It is a sin that brutally obscures the light of the Gospel. Along with

the rest of the Church and civil society, we have been gaining greater understanding of this shameful reality, especially because of the transgressions we have come to learn our founder committed.

First, I want to thank those who have broken the silence that usually surrounds sexual abuse because of the shame and suffering that accompany it. Their voices have prompted us to seek the truth about what happened in order to help the victims and to renew our determination to prevent this from happening in the future. We deeply regret the pain that we have caused them. Like the rest of the Church and society, today we better understand that care for victims of sexual abuse is a priority. We are committed to continue to welcome them with compassion and offer to accompany them on a path of healing and reconciliation.

2. Actions undertaken by the authorities of the congregation

In our actions, we have placed special interest and effort in preventing sexual abuse, in line with the commitments we made in our communiqué of March 25, 2010. The central government has required that, wherever we have a presence, the appropriate steps are taken to protect the integrity of the minors entrusted to our pastoral care and to respond promptly and professionally to any accusation of sexual abuse.

Thanks to the guidelines established by the Holy See and the efforts of many Legionaries and lay people, in all territories clear steps have been taken. Some countries are more advanced than others, but all are aware that this area is a priority for the Legion of Christ. I have asked the territorial directors to include this point in the reports they will submit to the general chapter.

The sexual abuse of minors committed by our founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel, was investigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) which imposed the corresponding canonical sanctions in 2006. Although initially many of us in the Legion maintained the founder's innocence, in successive years undeniable evidence of aspects of his hidden life began to come to light. So, in March 2010 the major superiors publicly expressed their sorrow for these deeds and, in January 2011 the pontifical delegate established the Outreach Commission, presided by Msgr. Mario Marchesi, with the mission of caring for those who were requesting a response from the Legionaries of Christ because of Fr. Maciel or in relation to him. The news was widely publicized in the media and the contact information for the Outreach Commission is on our websites. All victims of Fr. Maciel who approached the commission have been visited, listened to and attended to. The

commission has considered with each one how the Legion could help them overcome their wounds and face the difficulties of their present life. Afterwards the commission submitted personalized proposals to the papal delegate and the general directorate. We have acted accordingly and at this time none of these cases remains open. The commission will submit a conclusive report to the general chapter.

Some people who have been victims of Fr. Maciel, both inside and outside the congregation, did not want to make contact with the Outreach Commission. Naturally, the commission respected this personal decision and has not insisted with anyone. In some cases we have been able to listen to these people and care for them in other ways. Our commitment to help these wounds heal still stands.

3. Summary of the diagnosis regarding responses to accusations

We have also done a thorough diagnosis of the dimensions of this problem within the Legion and the manner in which allegations have been handled. With this we wanted to ensure that all charges of sexual abuse against Legionaries have been adequately addressed and to verify that no one who in the past has been found guilty of sexual abuse of minors currently has ministerial contact with children or adolescents. In this letter, I offer an overview of the most significant elements of this diagnosis.

We have arrived at the following numerical summary of the allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Legionary priests known as of the publication of this letter. In total the congregation has received thirty-five accusations against priests alleging sexual abuse of minors. In fourteen cases, sexual abuse did not take place (ten priests were found innocent after an investigation made according to canon 1717 of the Code of Canon Law; the other four cases involved imprudent behavior, but not crimes that would require sanctions). Nine priests were found guilty and punished canonically (two were laicized and seven had sanctions imposed on their life and ministry). Two priests had already left the ministry when the allegations were presented and therefore no canonical procedures were initiated against them. Of the ten cases that are still under review, currently there are four pending a resolution from the CDF. The other six cases were addressed at the time they came up, but not by the standards and procedures of the new norms the Church published in 2001. Although the victims did not ask to reopen these cases, we have inquired at the CDF and they recommended that we complete the canonical investigations.

We have also received five allegations of sexual misconduct by superiors and formators of the Legion against adults who were under their authority (six, if we include the founder). After investigation, two cases were judged to have been imprudent behavior that did not warrant restrictions on ministry. There is one case that allegedly occurred forty years ago, but the accusation was made recently. In this case, even though the investigation pointed to his innocence, by common consent restrictions were imposed on the priest, in an abundance of caution. There are two more priests who were accused and, after an investigation there was no serious reason to doubt the veracity of the events in question. In each case, appropriate measures were taken.

Today I can assure one and all that we have put the necessary means in place to ensure that no member of the congregation can have ministerial contact with minors if we have information that indicates that he has committed a crime of sexual abuse. Also in the cases that remain under investigation, their superiors have imposed precautionary measures until the investigation is concluded and the competent authorities issue their judgment.

We have also reviewed, as far as possible, the accusations of sexual abuse made in blogs, newspaper articles and some books. Some of these cases are allegations that have already been investigated and concluded. These are included in the numbers given above. There are also statements which are either isolated, anonymous or so generic or partial that they do not provide elements that indicate the veracity necessary to initiate an investigation according to canon 1717 of the Code of Canon Law. When a victim or an eyewitness presents an accusation of sexual abuse to the authorities of the Legion with elements that give it credibility, it will be responded to according to the procedures established in each territory.

4. The principles that guide us in the struggle against sexual abuse of minors

Thanks to the leadership of the Holy See and some conferences of bishops, which in recent years have prompted a stronger response by the Church to the terrible crime of sexual abuse, the Legion has also sought to review the way we address these issues. We have asked for advice and studied the way other international religious congregations respond in these cases.

Prevention and response to accusations are the responsibility of the territorial authorities

We have found that prevention, response to accusations, and the pastoral accompaniment both of the victim and of the accused are all better handled at the territorial level. Besides the greater responsiveness with which the accusations can be attended, this ensures that the procedures undertaken will always be in compliance with the civil and ecclesiastical laws of each country. For these reasons, the Legion is committed to following this procedure. The necessary means are in place to make this happen.

Means for prevention: codes of conduct, selection of candidates, training

The responsibilities of the territorial directors in this area include the promulgation and updating of codes of conduct for the Legionaries of Christ, the proper selection of candidates who desire to enter the congregation, and training of all members in this area, even members who minister in dioceses that do not require it.

When an accusation arrives: Clear procedures, care for victims and for the accused

Each territory has developed or is refining its procedures to attend to allegations as they arise, always observing civil laws that require crimes to be reported to the competent authorities.

The territorial director, as the ordinary, is the one who decides whether to begin a canonical investigation, imposes the appropriate restrictions *ad cautelam*, and, when appropriate, presents the findings of the investigation to the CDF. As well, he is the one who ensures the proper pastoral and psychological care for the alleged victims and the accused Legionary during the investigation. The same applies once the investigation has come to a conclusion regarding the truth of the facts.

Prioritize the victims and the prevention of future occurrences

The prevention of future occurrences and the healing of victims (known and possibly unknown) are a priority. For this reason, at times it may be necessary for the superiors of the congregation to disclose the fact that an allegation has been received and, as well, the results of an investigation. This may at times be a duty of justice for the victims and the persons entrusted to our pastoral care, even though it may entail the toleration of undesired effects such as scandal and the damage to the reputation of the priest.

Presumption of innocence for the duration of the process

In all legal systems, a defendant is considered innocent until his guilt is sufficiently proven. It is very difficult for a priest who has been accused of sexual abuse of minors to escape a certain shadow of suspicion, even if his innocence is proven. For this reason, we should respect the confidentiality due to the persons involved, especially while the investigation is being carried out. Thus, we can avoid damaging the good name of our brothers and, if the allegations turn out to be unfounded, it will be easier to restore his reputation and return him to active ministry. However, the reserve and confidentiality with which one should proceed in these issues should never compromise cooperation with the competent authorities or support of the alleged victims.

When someone is proved guilty of sexual abuse

Finally I would like to mention the principles that we apply with respect to members of the congregation who have committed abusive acts against minors. Here we must distinguish. If a religious in formation is found to be guilty of sexual abuse, in addition to facing the demands of justice, he will be invited to apply for a dispensation from his religious vows or, if applicable, a process of expulsion from the congregation will begin. We cannot in any way promote to holy orders someone who has committed a crime of this nature.

If the abuser is a priest, in addition to complying with the sanctions civil or ecclesiastical authorities impose, if he is not laicized, he will be excluded from the possibility of ministerial access to minors, and if appropriate, from all public exercise of priestly ministry. Since this type of behavior often stems from a sickness, and resolutions to reform – even though they may be sincere – often turn out to be useless, competent authorities have an obligation to do what is necessary to protect offenders from themselves so that they will not harm others. The territorial directors will impose the necessary restrictions. At the same time, as far as possible, they will seek to aid the fallen brother in helping to repair the damage done and to never despair of the mercy of God, who has the power to bring good out of even the most horrific of evils.

5. Recommendations for a Christian response to the phenomenon of sexual abuse

As I already mentioned, the victims should be at the center of our attentive care. We must ask ourselves how we can help these persons to rediscover life and regain trust in Jesus Christ and in the Church. We should all feel responsible for ensuring that in the Legion of Christ there is not room for ambiguity with respect to protecting the innocence of minors who are

under our pastoral care. This issue will need to be addressed in the general chapter.

Preventing sexual abuse and care for the victims: priorities of the congregation

Closely accompanying the territories in fulfilling these responsibilities will be one of the priorities of the general directorate. These responsibilities include: helping victims, preventing sexual abuse of minors, responding to allegations of sexual abuse, the communication of the conclusions of the processes to the victims and others concerned, and pastoral care of abusers.

Religious in formation should discern properly

In the journey of vocational discernment and especially during the first years of formation, you must, in dialogue with your formators, honestly ask the question of the existence of an impediment or a condition that could put the persons you will be caring for as a priest at risk. Do not be afraid to ask for help with any difficulties you may have. Religious life and the priesthood are great and beautiful gifts, but when we make this commitment in a lasting way, we assume a great responsibility before God, the Church and souls.

Willingness to listen to and care for those who have suffered sexual abuse

I would like to use this opportunity to reiterate the invitation once again to anyone who may have suffered sexual abuse by a member of the Legion of Christ, to consider approaching us and telling us about the experience. We want to know the facts and hear the story, understand the grief, ask for forgiveness for the suffering caused and walk the path of healing together with the victims.

Anyone who has suffered sexual abuse as a minor carries a deep wound inside which he needs to care for so that it will heal. If any Legionary has suffered sexual abuse in the past, regardless of who was the aggressor, we want you to know that the superiors would be honored to be able to provide the necessary help so you can move on in life and live your consecration to the Lord with serenity and joy.

No one can remain silent about sexual abuse

Similarly, if anyone observes any imprudent behavior or boundary violations, or has information regarding sexual abuse of minors outside of

confession, please do not remain silent. Depending on the nature of the incident and observing established procedures, report the matter to the competent authority so that appropriate action can be taken.

I have dwelt on a subject that it is not easy to address in writing. As pastors of souls and as our brothers' keepers, we are all committed to overcome evil with the power of good. When we acknowledge the wounds that exist in our history, God enables us to heal them and to commit ourselves to draw lessons from them that will help us in the future.

It is normal that the simple fact that sexual abuse has occurred fills us with sadness and shame. It breaks our hearts to learn of the suffering caused by those who have been called to bring people to Christ. To express our feelings, I would like to borrow the words addressed to priests and religious in Pope Benedict XVI's Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland:

“All of us are suffering as a result of the sins of our confreres who betrayed a sacred trust or failed to deal justly and responsibly with allegations of abuse. In view of the outrage and indignation which this has provoked, not only among the lay faithful but among yourselves and your religious communities, many of you feel personally discouraged, even abandoned. I am also aware that in some people's eyes you are tainted by association, and viewed as if you were somehow responsible for the misdeeds of others. At this painful time, I want to acknowledge the dedication of your priestly and religious lives and apostolates, and I invite you to reaffirm your faith in Christ, your love of his Church, and your confidence in the Gospel's promise of redemption, forgiveness and interior renewal. In this way, you will demonstrate for all to see that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more (cf. *Romans* 5:20).

“I know that many of you are disappointed, bewildered and angered by the way these matters have been handled by some of your superiors. Yet, it is essential that you cooperate closely with those in authority and help to ensure that the measures adopted to respond to the crisis will be truly evangelical, just and effective. Above all, I urge you to become ever more clearly men and women of prayer, courageously following the path of conversion, purification and reconciliation.”

Dear fathers and brothers, I cannot end this letter without thanking God for the gift of a large group of priests and brothers in formation, of all generations, who live their vocation with authenticity and generosity. I want to thank him for the grace of living with so many men who daily offer their lives

for the salvation of souls and are a sign of Christ's presence in their communities and in their apostolate.

May the Lord grant us all the grace of following the paths of the Gospel, of faithfully observing his commandments and of configuring our lives with the mystery of the Lord's cross. May he, the God of all consolation, help us bring peace and the light of the Gospel to the men and women he has entrusted to our pastoral care.

Your brother in Christ and the Legion,

P. Sylvester Heereman, L.C.