

9/6/07 -Catholic Order Files Suit Over Documents,
By Daniela Deane, Washington Post Staff Writer

Former priest John Paul Lennon says the Legion of Christ is a dangerous and ultra-secretive cult that still idolizes its founder even though the spiritual leader was sanctioned by the Vatican after years of sexual abuse allegations. The Legion accuses the Alexandria man of distributing stolen property and "malicious disinformation" about a fast-growing Roman Catholic Church order with tens of thousands of followers world-wide.

The argument is unfolding in Alexandria Circuit Court in a lawsuit the Legion filed last month that seeks to block Lennon, a Legion member for 23 years, from disseminating on a Web site letters and documents it says are the order's private property and intended only for internal use. Some internal documents chronicle the conservative group's strict rules of conduct, including directives on how a legionary, as the order's members are known, must butter his bread, part his hair or sit in a chair. The documents also include the group's "private vows," which say that members must never criticize the order and must report anyone who does.

Under a recent court order, Lennon must turn over any Legion property by Sept. 14, including documents, computer disks and CDs. Besides Lennon, the Legion is suing Regain Inc., the corporation that owns <http://www.regainnetwork.org>, a Web site critical of the Legion. Lennon is its president. Other former Legion members and relatives and friends of former Legion members are involved in the corporation and the Web site, Lennon said.

Lennon, 63, a child and family therapist in Arlington, recently found a lawyer to represent him in the suit, which he said came out of the blue. He said the deep-pocketed order, which he left more than 20 years ago because he had grown disillusioned, is trying to silence former members and teach him a lesson. "They're also trying to scare anybody else who would dare to share these documents with the public," he said. "It's the Alexandria witch hunt instead of the Salem witch hunt. It's like a 21st-century Inquisition.

"Jim Fair, a Chicago-based spokesman for the order, couldn't disagree more." "Regain has some materials that belong to the Legion and that they are using," he said. "They were not granted use of them, and we'd like them to stop doing that." Attorneys for the order declined to comment. In the lawsuit, the Legion is also asking for the identities of individuals writing on the Regain site and on a Web discussion board, <http://www.exlegionaries.com>, that was once affiliated with it.

Regain severed ties with the discussion board this year after pressure from the Legion, Lennon said. Many of the documents at issue are private letters written by the group's founder, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado. Some of the letters have been posted on the site and the discussion board. Last year, Pope Benedict XVI took disciplinary action against Maciel after a long, on-again, off-again investigation into allegations of sexual abuse. Maciel is no longer supposed to celebrate Mass in public, give lectures or make other public presentations. Maciel, 87, is the founder and patriarch of the Legion of Christ, a worldwide order of more than 750 priests and 2,500 seminarians, and of Regnum Christi, an affiliated movement of lay people that claims 70,000 members around the world.

The U.S. headquarters for the order is in Connecticut. Both groups are built around the aging priest's "charism," a church term for exceptional gifts and mission. Maciel, who was close to Pope John Paul II and is venerated by many Catholics, stepped down as head of the Legion after last year's papal sanction. He then left Rome and moved to his hometown of Cotija, Mexico. Complaints of sexual abuse against Maciel came to light in the 1990s, when nine former members of the Legion, including several priests, alleged that Maciel had molested them when they were young seminarians, from the 1940s into the 1960s.

The National Catholic Reporter newspaper, citing Vatican sources, reported last year that the number of accusers who had come forward was "more than 20, but less than 100." Lennon said the number of victims is much greater than 100. Lennon said turning over any documents he has would not stop them from being circulated. He denies that any were obtained illegally. "They have lots and lots of money," Lennon said of the Legion. "I don't have any. The idea is to drag this on in such a way that it will bleed us to death." Lennon is soliciting donations for his legal defense on the site.

Jason Berry, who co-wrote a 2004 book and produced a forthcoming documentary film about the Maciel case, both titled "Vows of Silence," called the group's founder "arguably the greatest fundraiser in the history of the modern church." He's also "one of the worst pedophiles in the history of the church," Berry said. On the two Web sites, former members of the order discuss the sexual abuse allegations that drove Maciel out of Rome. But Lennon said most members of the order would not even be aware of the allegations. "They can only watch certain television programs, they don't have radios and they can't use the phone without permission from their superiors," he said. He added that phone calls are monitored.

"The Legion of Christ is trying to shut down Regain, which is a clearing house for information on what the Legion is really about," Berry said. "It shows the group's extraordinary hubris in thinking they can crush an opponent by trampling on the First Amendment.

"Staff writer Alan Cooperman contributed to this report.
