

Man Says Religious Order Misled Him

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The state's attorney general is investigating the complaint of an elderly Stratford man that a controversial Roman Catholic religious order gained title to his home through misrepresentations and by exerting undue influence.

John T. Walsh Jr., 79, lodged his complaint against the Legionaries of Christ, based in Orange, with the public charities unit of the attorney general's office.

"Under charity law there is an exception for religious charities but there is law protecting senior citizens. We will look into these issues to determine whether there were any violations," Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said.

The Legion says Walsh's decision to transfer the property in November 2003, with the right to live in the home for life, was made knowingly and voluntarily.

"The Legion welcomes any inquiry from the attorney general," said Jay Dunlap, Legion spokesman. "I have spoken with our folks who have worked on this case. They made sure Mr. Walsh was fully informed and that he had legal representation."

Dunlap said he knows Walsh as a devout man who often participated in the Legion's spiritual events and cannot believe the assertions in the complaint.

Walsh, the father of five adult children, was diagnosed recently with cancer of the esophagus and has been given less than six months to live. Speaking hoarsely over the telephone, he said he made the donation in good faith without telling his family. It was only afterward when his children found out about it that they convinced him that he had been a victim of manipulation.

Widowed in 2001, he lives alone on a fixed monthly income of \$1,600 and cares for himself.

John Walsh III, a son who runs a mortgage company in Milford, has recently been given power of attorney for his father's affairs. "My mother handled everything," John Walsh III said. ""She would not have let them in the house in a million years."

The son said his father, a retired chemical plant worker, "used to confide in me about everything" but not about donating the house. The father said he did not consult his children because he knew they would be against it. He said he realizes now that was a mistake.

The elder Walsh alleged in his complaint that "the Legion of Christ exerted undue influence over me through never-ending and persistent solicitations of donations. In addition the Legion of Christ's representatives made several false representations to me that I relied on prior to executing a quitclaim deed transferring my home over to them."

Among the misrepresentations, he wrote, were that he would not be responsible for the payment of property taxes after the transfer of the home, then valued at \$295,000, and "a promise that I would not experience any financial hardship as a result of the transfer of my only significant asset to the Legion of Christ."

In fact, he said, he has been struggling since to meet his monthly obligations. His property taxes increased as a result of the transfer - from \$3,521 to \$5,031 - because he lost his personal exemptions as a veteran and a senior citizen.

Deborah Pothier, Stratford tax collector, confirmed that he lost his exemptions but said that "taxes should be the responsibility of the Legion of Christ unless a private agreement was made." Such an agreement was made among the papers the father signed at closing.

But there is a dispute over the tax issue. Dunlap said the Legion offered to pay the difference between what his tax bill had been and its new, higher amount.

"They did not offer to pay it. It's not true what they told you," Walsh said. He said when he got the higher tax bill, which the Legion forwarded to him, he called a Legion accountant who said he would turn it over to the order's legal department. Then he was sent the sewer bill. When he heard nothing further, he said, "I felt I'll pay it this year but I am not going to pay it this next time."

The father also gave the Legion \$20,000 out of a \$100,000 loan he took on the property, which he repays at \$313 a month. He gave an additional \$25,000 to the Eternal Word Television Network, a conservative Catholic enterprise, and \$8,000 to each of his five children. When several "consecrated women" from Rhode Island who are affiliated with the Legion visited his home, he gave them \$5,000.

The elder Walsh said he was introduced to the Legion six or seven years ago by a friend and began contributing \$10 a month. Later he won \$500 in a Legion raffle and upped his contribution to \$30 a month. He began receiving visits from Legion representatives, including two seminarians who persuaded him to donate \$20,000 for the education of priests. They then persuaded him to donate his house, he said.

Last year he wrote a tribute in a Legion newsletter, saying he admired their priests so much he decided to give up his house after his death "in order to help more young men like them become priests in the future."

Walsh said he regrets writing that testimonial now because he has become totally disillusioned with the Legion.

"I hope they just give me back my house and that will be the end of it," he said.

The Legion of Christ, which has a seminary in Cheshire, has a reputation for aggressiveness in recruitment and fund-raising. The order and its affiliated group of lay supporters, known as Regnum Christi, have the support of the Vatican. They are headquartered in the Archdiocese of Hartford, where they have had support of the archbishops since they opened their national headquarters in Connecticut in 1965.

But they are banned from operating in some dioceses in the United States. In November Archbishop Harry Flynn accused the Legion of trying to set up a "parallel church" and barred the order and Regnum Christi from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. In 2000 they were kicked out of the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio.

The Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, 84, stepped down in mid-January as head of the Rome-based religious order, citing his age and "desire to see the congregation flourish under a successor." The Vatican recently reopened an investigation into allegations that Maciel had sexually abused young seminarians in his order years ago.