

## Vatican Says Mexican Priest Will Not Face Abuse Trial

By IAN FISHER  
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ROME, May 21 - The founder of an influential Roman Catholic order in Mexico will not face a church trial on longstanding allegations that he molested teenagers, a Vatican spokesman said on Saturday.

In December, the Vatican opened a full-scale investigation into the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the 85-year-old founder of the Legionaries of Christ and a prominent religious figure in Mexico. At least eight people came forward in the late 1990's to accuse him of abusing them between 1943 and the early 1960's.

But on Saturday, the Rev. Ciro Benedettini, the spokesman, said that no charges would be brought against Father Maciel. He did not say why the investigation was ended.

"There is no investigation now, and it is not foreseeable that there will be another investigation in the future," Father Ciro said by telephone.

The news seems likely to receive particular scrutiny since it is the first major sex abuse case - one of the most important issues facing the church in North America - decided under Pope Benedict XVI.

Before he became pope last month, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was responsible for overseeing investigations into priests accused of sexual abuse.

The news was first reported by Catholic News Service on Friday, following a press release from the Legionaries that the investigation ended with no "canonical process," the church equivalent of a trial.

In Mexico, where the case against Father Maciel began, word about the end of the investigation made headlines in most daily newspapers on Saturday, and several victims - many of them prominent professionals - said they were incredulous that the Vatican would drop the case.

Juan Vaca, one of men who accused Father Maciel, now an adjunct professor of psychology and sociology at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., said that the Vatican investigator, Msgr. Charles Scicluna, had told him and other victims he was convinced they were telling the truth.

"He even said, 'The church owes you a public apology, because we failed to protect you,'" said Mr. Vaca, a former priest.

"This will end the credibility of the Vatican, from the pope down. I don't believe they are going to do such damage to the credibility of the Vatican."

In its press release, the Legionaries said that Father Maciel had "unambiguously affirmed his innocence." Asked whether the Vatican's decision not to bring legal proceedings amounted to an exoneration, Jay Dunlap, the communications director for the Legionaries North American region, said, "That's what it sounds like to us."

The Legionaries was founded by Father Maciel in Mexico in 1941 and has now grown to include about 650 priests worldwide and 2,500 seminarians in 20 countries, Mr. Dunlap said. The order runs a dozen universities, and recently opened its first degree-granting college in the United

States, the University of Sacramento. Father Maciel stepped down from the order's leadership this year. Pope John Paul II had repeatedly praised him and his work, most recently at a public audience last Nov. 30, for the 60th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

In 1994, in a trip to Mexico, Pope John Paul II called him "an efficacious guide to youth" - a statement that several victims said prompted them to make complaints.

Eight accusers, former members of the order and most of them Mexican, first lodged a formal complaint with the Vatican in 1998, maintaining that Father Maciel had sexually abused them when they were students, between 10 and 16 years old.

Because the accusations past the statute of limitations to be investigated under criminal law, the group brought a suit against Father Maciel under the Vatican's canonical law.

Sister Sharon Euart, president of the Canon Law Society of America, said there was also a sort of statute of limitations in church law. In 2001, Pope John Paul II extended the time in which a minor, defined as someone under 19, could lodge a complaint of sexual abuse. Under the new rule, accusers could bring a complaint up to their 29th birthday.

Laurie Goodstein contributed reporting from New York for this article and Ginger Thompson from Mexico City.

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