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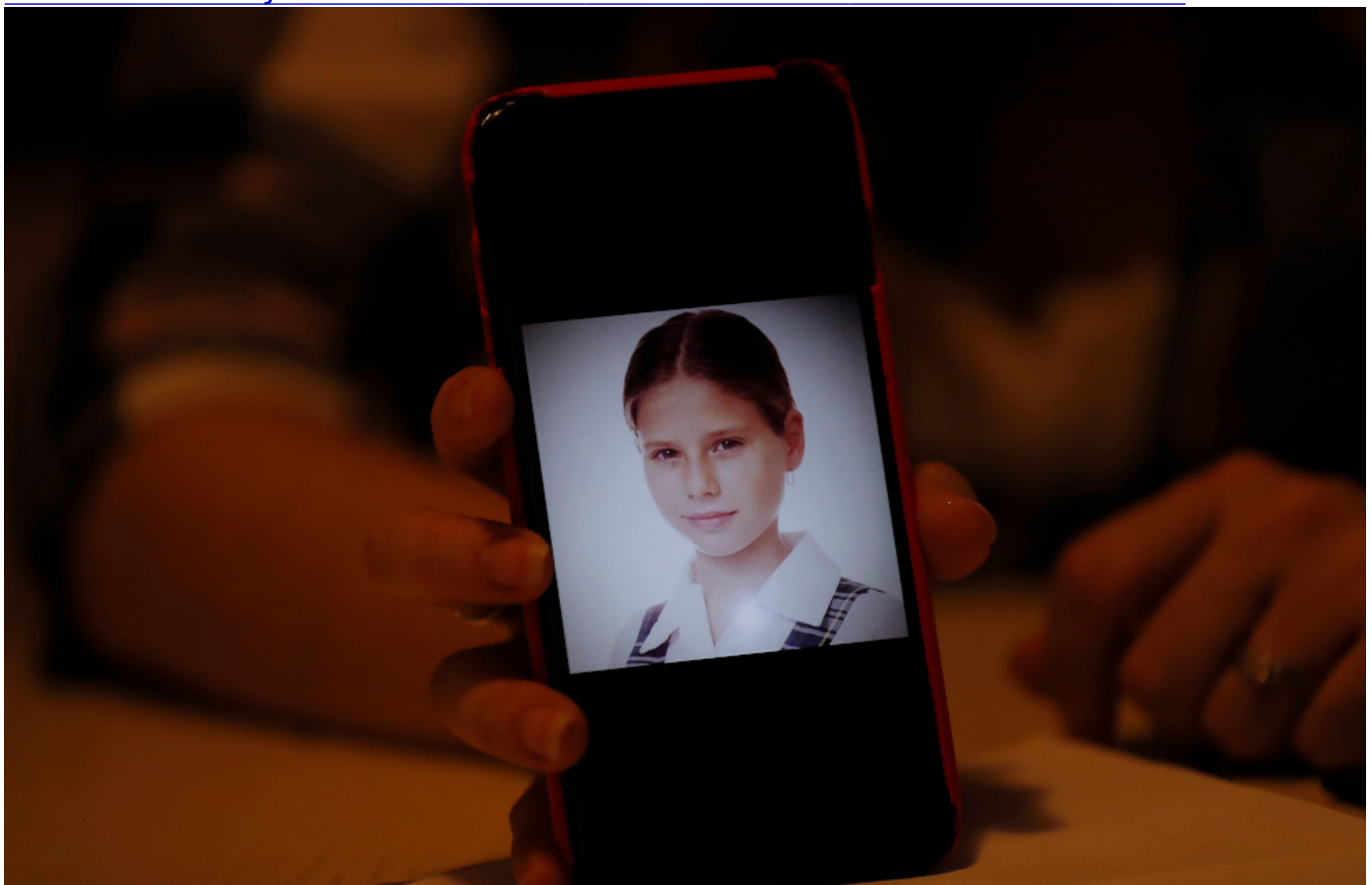
The Associated Press

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Vatican City — January 21, 2020

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In this Jan. 14, 2020 photo, Ana Lucia Salazar shows a photo of herself when she was 8-years-old, on her smart phone during an interview with the Associated Press in Mexico City. At the time Salazar says she was sexually abused by a Legion of Christ

priest. (AP/Marco Ugarte)

The Legion of Christ religious order, already discredited because of its pedophile founder, announced a joint Vatican investigation Monday into the botched handling of a priest who sexually abused girls as young as 6 and suffered no punishment.

The horrific case of Fernando Martínez Suárez, which The Associated Press reported on Monday, has sparked a new credibility crisis just as the Legion was trying to show it had changed course 10 years after the Vatican determined it was a cult-like order built on secrecy, silence and obedience.

Its multiple failures, cover-ups and botched responses to Martinez's victims renewed calls from within the church that the Vatican should have suppressed the Legion altogether rather than take it over and try to reform it a decade ago.

The AP report quoted Martinez's victims as saying a school administrator at the Colegio Cumbres in Cancun, Mexico, used to take them out of class and sent them to the chapel, where Martinez would molest them. One said he would sit her on his lap, pull her panties aside and digitally penetrate her while he masturbated.

The victims' families reported him to the Legion starting in 1992, but Martinez was merely transferred to a seminary in Salamanca, Spain, with no formal restrictions on his ministry. He was only defrocked last week after the victims came forward.

The Legion announced Monday it would conduct the joint investigation with the Vatican into the handling of the case, vowing that all superiors involved would cooperate. A new commission would welcome victims and propose ways to repair the damage they suffered.

It also announced that the Legion priest who first took the complaints from Martinez's victims would stand down from a big meeting of superiors that opened Monday in Rome.

In a letter announcing his decision, the Rev. Eloy Bedia apologized to the victims but defended himself, saying all personnel decisions at the time were decided by the Legion's then-superior and founder, the Rev. Marcial Maciel.

Maciel, who was hailed by the Vatican during the pontificate of St. John Paul II, is the 20th century Catholic Church's most notorious pedophile. The Vatican, which knew of his crimes starting in the 1940s, determined he raped his seminarians, fathered at least three children and built an entire order to cater to his whims.

The Martinez case, however, also confirmed Vatican complicity in the continuing cover-up. The papal delegate appointed to run the order, the late Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, learned of the case between 2011-2013 when he was asked to take action against Martinez since no proper investigation had ever been conducted.

But at the moment in which Martinez could have finally been brought to justice, De Paolis refused requests to report him to church and civil authorities, arguing that no other complaints had been received, according to an outside investigation commissioned by the Legion.

"De Paolis followed the norm of not opening cases prior to 2001," when new procedures were introduced requiring abuse cases be sent to the Vatican for processing, according to the current Legion superior, the Rev. Eduardo Robles Gil. The comment was contained in an email to a former Legion priest, a copy of which was posted on the Facebook group "Legioleaks" Monday.

As a result, the Vatican reform itself is now in question since De Paolis refused to conduct any historic reckoning into other cases of abuse among the 33 known Legion abusers, or any investigation into the web of cover-up that enabled their crimes and those of Maciel.

Many of Maciel's top lieutenants are still superiors in power at the order.

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