



Pope Benedict XVI on Saturday took control of the Legionaries of Christ, a powerful and wealthy Roman Catholic religious order whose founder, a friend of Pope John Paul II, was found to have molested seminarians and fathered several children.

The move constituted the most direct action on sexual abuse since the most recent scandals have engulfed the church and prompted criticisms of the pope's own handling of such cases as an archbishop in Munich and as a cardinal who led the office reviewing many sexual abuse charges.

In a statement on Saturday, the Vatican said that Benedict would appoint a special delegate to govern the Legionaries, an influential worldwide order that has been an important source of new priests in a church that has struggled with a shrinking priesthood in much of the developed world. It was founded in 1941 by a Mexican priest, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

Benedict also said he would appoint a special commission to examine the Legionaries' constitution and open an investigation into its lay affiliate, Regnum Christi.

The measures mean that the order would be governed directly from the Vatican. But the pope decided against dissolving the order or forcing out much of its leadership — at least for now — steps urged by many critics and victims' advocates, who say they believe that the leaders must have known, or should have known, of the abuses.

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