



FILE - Vatican investigators Monsignor Jordi Bertomeu, from Spain, right, and Archbishop Charles Scicluna, from Malta, walk outside of the Nunciatura Apostolica during a break from meeting with people who alleged abuse by the Catholic lay group Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (SCV) in Lima, Peru, on July 25, 2023. A Peruvian archbishop who sued two journalists over their reports about sexual abuse and financial corruption in his religious movement, Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, has resigned amid a Vatican investigation. Pope Francis on Tuesday April 2, 2024 accepted the resignation of Piura Archbishop José Eguren. At 67, he is several years shy of the normal retirement age for bishops of 75. (AP/Martin Mejia, File)

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A Peruvian archbishop who sued two journalists over their reports about sexual abuse and alleged financial corruption in his religious movement, Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, has resigned amid a Vatican investigation.

Pope Francis on Tuesday accepted the resignation of Piura Archbishop José Eguren. At 67, he is several years shy of the normal retirement age for bishops of 75.

The Vatican didn't say why Eguren was retiring early in its brief announcement. But the Vatican last year began an in-depth investigation into alleged abuse and financial wrongdoing in the Peruvian-based Sodalitium to which Eguren belongs.

The Vatican has had its eye on Sodalitium, which has chapters across South America and the U.S., for over a decade. In 2017, a report commissioned by the group's new leadership determined that its founder, Luis Fernando Figari, sodomized his recruits and subjected them to humiliating psychological and other sexual abuses.

Those abuses first came to light in 2015, thanks to reporting by Peruvian journalists Pedro Salinas and Paola Ugaz. In addition to Figari's own abuses, their reporting exposed the alleged forced eviction of peasants on lands in Eguren's diocese by a Sodalitium-linked real estate developer.

In 2018, Eguren sued them for defamation, seeking about \$100,000 total and jail time for what he alleged was damage to his honor and reputation. He dropped the aggravated defamation lawsuit in 2019, after he came under criticism from even within the Peruvian church.

Last year, the Vatican sent its two top sex abuse investigators to Peru to investigate not only allegations of sexual and psychological abuses still in the Sodalitium, but

also allegations of financial corruption.

The report's details have not been released, but Salinas suggested Eguren's removal was directly related to the Vatican investigation and a possible sign that other action could be forthcoming.

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"This is unprecedented and should be interpreted as the preamble to something bigger: the possible suppression of the Sodalitium," Salinas said in a text message to The Associated Press.

Salinas himself was a victim of Figari and has been at the forefront of trying to hold Sodalitium accountable. Ugaz has worked for years to expose the group's abuses, suffering multiple lawsuits as a result of her reporting.

She met with Francis in 2022, and in comments Tuesday to the AP, thanked the pope for agreeing to send the same Vatican investigators who exposed widespread sexual abuse in the Chilean Catholic Church, Archbishop Charles Scicluna and Monsignor Jordi Bertomeu, to look into the Sodalitium abuses.

Ugaz said their work "has been decisive in moving the needle in the Sodalitium case which has existed since 1971 and has never until today, 2024, been accountable for its actions to its victims of sexual, physical and psychological abuse."

She added that she hoped the developments would also put an end to what she called the "judicial persecution" against her for her reporting.

Eguren made no mention of the investigation in a statement posted on the Piura archdiocesan website that announced his resignation and the nomination of temporary successor, Monsignor Guillermo Elías Millares.

Eguren said that at all times he had "tried to fulfill the mission entrusted to me, with justice, honesty and fidelity to the teachings of the church, with special concern for the good of the poorest and most needy."

He quoted Pope Benedict XVI as saying that "loving the church also means having the courage to make difficult and painful decisions, always keeping in mind the good of the church and not of ourselves."

Figari founded the SCV, as the Sodalitium is known, in 1971, as a lay community to recruit "soldiers for God." It was one of several Catholic societies born as a conservative reaction to the left-leaning liberation theology movement that swept through Latin America starting in the 1960s.

Victims first complained to the Lima archdiocese about Figari's perversions and abuses in May 2011. The archdiocese says it turned the case over to the Vatican immediately, but neither the local church nor the Holy See took concrete action until Salinas' book, "Half Monks, Half Soldiers," was published in 2015.

Sodalitium has said in the past that it was collaborating with the Vatican investigation. It has quoted Figari as saying he is innocent, but has called the allegations in "Half Monks, Half Soldiers" plausible.