



Pope Francis greets the superior general of Sodalitium, José David Correa, during a private audience at the Vatican Oct. 30, 2021. (OSV News/Vatican Media via Catholic Press Photo)

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The controversial lay movement Sodalitium Christianae Vitae was forced to confirm news that it was suppressed by Pope Francis after two of its members leaked the news to a Catholic news outlet.

In a statement released Jan. 20, the movement said the news site, Infovaticana, "published the news that the Holy Father had dissolved our society of apostolic life" and that while it was true, its article "contained several inaccuracies."

According to Infovaticana's report, Cardinal Gianfranco Ghirlanda, who was appointed as the movement's delegate of formation in 2019, announced the Sodalitium's suppression to its members during the group's General Assembly in Aparecida, Brazil Jan. 18.

Two Sodalitium members, the statement said, "admitted to having violated the confidentiality of the case and, after asking for forgiveness from those present, were definitively expelled from the Assembly."

"We regret that the misconduct of these two members may have been used by the press to generate doubts about whether it was" Ghirlanda who leaked the news, the movement said.

The pope's alleged decision to suppress Sodalitium — which was not yet officially confirmed by the Vatican and Vatican sources to whom OSV News reached out on the matter did not respond for a request for comment — would be the culmination of a series of decisions stemming from a 2023 investigation that also saw the expulsion of dozens of high-ranking members of the group, including its founder, Luis Fernando Figari, in August.

A month later, the Vatican announced the expulsion of 10 members, including Peruvian journalist Alejandro Bermúdez, who allegedly committed "abuse in the exercise of the apostolate of journalism."

Bermudez served as the longtime executive director of Catholic News Agency, or CNA, and the ACI Group, part of the EWTN family, until his retirement Dec. 31, 2022.

Responding to questions by OSV News Jan. 19, Bermúdez said there was no question regarding the pope's authority and that "if he decrees that the Sodalitium must be suppressed due to a lack of genuine charisma, then it must be suppressed," he said, citing an alleged main reason for suppression.

"However, I firmly believe that the process leading to this decision was deeply flawed, marked by a blatant violation of due process, disregard for the truth, and ideological bias on the part of Msgr. Jordi Bertomeu Farnós," he said.

"It is deeply saddening, though not entirely surprising, given that the individual leading this process, Msgr. Jordi Bertomeu, seemed intent on this outcome even before beginning the investigation of the community," Bermudez told OSV News.

The Vatican launched an investigation in July 2023, led by Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta — adjunct secretary of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith — and Msgr. Bertomeu, also a member of that department. During their investigation, the prelates met with victims and leaders of Sodalitium, as well as journalists who investigated the organization.

The investigation's findings are believed to have led to the series of expulsions from the group.

Bermúdez told OSV News that like any other group implicated in abuse, Sodalitium "warrants serious scrutiny and criticism." However, he also criticized media coverage, which he said "overlooked" its reform efforts.

"Despite these publicly accessible reforms, the narrative of 'complete disregard for the victim' — promoted systematically by Bertomeu — continues to spread. Detailed information about the Sodalitium's genuine reform efforts, has always been available," he said.

OSV News reached out to Bertomeu Jan. 19 but he declined to comment.

However, for Peruvian journalist Pedro Salinas, a former member of Sodalitium Christianae Vitae who suffered physical and psychological abuse by Figari,

"the Catholic Church took a while" to act since the first complaints surfaced 25 years ago by former member José Enrique Escardó.

In a message sent to OSV News Jan. 19, Salinas said that while he welcomed the unconfirmed reports of the group's end, he was also concerned whether "the suppression will extend to the other branches which, in my humble opinion, should also be suppressed, as they carry the DNA of the abuse."

"I am referring to the Christian Life Movement (CLM), which is an international association of the faithful and depends on the Pontifical Council for the Laity; the Marian Community of Reconciliation, whose members are known as 'Fraternas,' and the Servants of the Plan of God, also known as 'Siervas,' the latter two depending on the Archdiocese of Lima," he said.

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Bermúdez told OSV News that the alleged suppression only applies to Sodalitium, which is a "lay society of apostolic life (and) of pontifical right and thus falls into its own canonical category."

"Both the Siervas and the Fraternas are similar entities but of diocesan right, therefore their situation is being decided at a diocesan level, in this case by the Archdiocese of Lima, their place of foundation," he explained.

As an international lay movement, the CLM is not a religious institute, but an association of the faithful, and thus dependent on a different dicastery (the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life)," Bermúdez added.

Nevertheless, Salinas warned that should those branch groups continue to exist, "the Hydra's head will resurface in the offshoots of the so-called 'Sodalite family.'"

Salinas and fellow journalist Paola Ugaz co-wrote a book titled, "Mitad Monjes, Mitad Soldados" ("Half Monks, Half Soldiers"), which detailed the psychological and sexual abuse, as well as corporal punishment and extreme exercises that young members of Sodalitium Christianae Vitae were forced to endure.

Since then, both were targets of threats as well as persistent litigation from persons associated with Sodalitium and its members, including retired Archbishop Jose Eguren Anselmi of Piura, who launched multiple lawsuits against them in 2018. Facing pressure from the country's bishops, and the Vatican, the archbishop withdrew his lawsuits against both journalists.

Following the investigation by Scicluna and Bertomeu, the Vatican announced Eguren's resignation in April. At 67, the archbishop was eight years shy of the age canon law requires bishops to hand in their resignation. Francis expelled him from Sodalitium in September.

Salinas told OSV News that Francis gave Sodalitium "every opportunity to act correctly."

"But it did not because their sectarian blinders and arrogant attitude made them believe that, once again, by applying the 'Peruvian solution' (i.e. intimidating 'enemies' with judicial threats and smear campaigns), they could turn the tables," he said.

Salinas said the group's alleged attempts at intimidation were thwarted thanks to the mission undertaken by Scicluna and Bertomeu, as well as "the final and decisive intervention of" Sister Simona Brambilla, who was appointed Jan. 6 by Pope Francis as prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

"The truth, for a change, prevailed," Salinas told OSV News. "It took time to assert itself, yes, but it finally came to light."

For Ugaz, the decision to suppress Sodalitium, if confirmed by the Vatican, "lays bare the responsibility of members of the Peruvian Catholic Church, who, since the complaints against the group began in 2000, chose to look the other way."

"The Sodalitium did not grow on its own; it needed the support of a Peruvian political, financial, and media elite that accompanied and elevated it, thanks to the deals made by Father Jaime Baertl, taking advantage of the Concordat signed between Peru and the Vatican."

Expelled from Sodalitium in October, Baertl, a former spiritual assistant, was accused of sexual misconduct and involved "in numerous irregularities and illicit acts committed by companies linked to the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae."

Recalling the various lawsuits made against her by members and associates of Sodalitium, Ugaz said she and Salinas "experienced unprecedented persecution that tested our resolve, our peace of mind, that of our families, and our freedom."

"Thanks to the support of the international community, notably Pope Francis — whom I met with twice — I did not end up in prison," she said.

Ugaz also said the pope's decision to appoint Bertomeu to oversee the process was "a decision that will hit the Sodalitium hard."

"Bertomeu has simultaneously demonstrated closeness to the victims through his commitment to truth and justice, and has also endured direct attacks from Sodalitium, through figures like Giuliana Caccia, Sebastián Blanco and Alejandro Bermúdez," she told OSV News.

"The suppression makes it clear that both the Catholic Church and the state have fallen short," Ugaz said. "But unlike the state's debts, the Peruvian Catholic Church will be tested. Pope Francis and his team are watching them, and in this case, the emperor has been naked ever since the first complaint was made 25 years ago."

The scandal-plagued society of apostolic life was founded in Peru in 1971. Once a powerful Catholic institution that gathered members of the Peruvian elite, the Sodalitium saw itself hit by dozens of denunciations of sexual and psychological abuse, physical violence, misappropriation of funds, and other crimes by former members and journalists.

The Vatican's September document mentioned among reasons for the expulsions physical abuse "including sadism and violence," deploying tactics to "break the will of subordinates," spiritual abuse, abuse of authority including the cover-up of crimes, and abuse in the administration of church goods, and also "abuse in the exercise of the apostolate of journalism."