



## Trapped Chilean miners and the Legionaries of Christ

By *Jack Keogh*

### **“Don’t abandon us!”**

When the rescuers asked Luis Urzua, the leader of the trapped Chilean miners what they needed he said, "That you rescue us as quickly as possible, and that you don't abandon us." When I read that phrase and thought about the awful situation of the miners trapped deep below the earth, the Legionaries of Christ came to mind. The Legion has been on my mind because writing my book "Driving Straight on Crooked Lines: how an Irishman found his heart and nearly lost his mind," ([www.DrivingStraight.com](http://www.DrivingStraight.com)) recalling my experiences with them, rekindled lots of deep memories.

The Legionaries of Christ have just undergone an audit (Apostolic Visitation) by the Vatican which mostly focused on the conduct of Father Marcial Maciel Degollado the founder. The examiners found “the very grave and objectively immoral actions of Father Maciel, confirmed by incontrovertible testimonies, in some cases constitute real crimes and manifest a life devoid of scruples and authentic religious meaning.” They went on to say, "This life was unknown to the great majority of the Legionaries, above all because of the system of relationships constructed by Father Maciel, who was able skillfully to create alibis for himself, to obtain trust, confidence and silence from those around him, and to reinforce his personal role as a charismatic founder.” ([http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_comunicato-legionari-cristo-2010\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_comunicato-legionari-cristo-2010_en.html))

Another statement in the Vatican’s findings, comes to mind in light of the Chilean mine disaster: “the discovery and the knowledge of the truth concerning the founder gave rise among the members of the Legion to surprise, dismay and profound grief, which was clearly brought out by the Visitors.” Now, the Legionaries are faced with the need to redefine the charism of the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ, preserving its true nucleus, ...not be identified with the drive for efficiency at any cost.” They must “review the exercise of authority,” “preserve the enthusiasm of the young people’s faith, their missionary zeal and their apostolic dynamism, by means of adequate formation.” Disappointment regarding the founder could call into question their vocation and the nucleus of the charism that belongs to the Legionaries of Christ and is proper to them.

### **Survival depends on “trust”**

I expect that in their current situation, the vast majority of Legionaries must be asking the Church, like the leader of the trapped miners, “rescue us as quickly as possible, and don't abandon us.” To which the Holy Father responds that [he] “intends to reassure all the Legionaries and members of the Movement Regnum Christi that they will not be left in



isolation: the Church firmly intends to accompany them and to help them along the path of purification that awaits them.” Not unlike the trapped Chilean miners, the survival of

the Legionaries, as a distinct religious congregation within the Catholic Church, will depend in large measure on their willingness to trust their “rescuers.” It will also require the “emergence” of new leaders with specific abilities for the job at hand. And, of course, they must have a very clear understanding of their situation and their need for “rescue.”

## **Boom Times**

Chile has seen a boom over the past decade as rising copper prices filled the government's coffers and allowed it to ride out the global recession. Record copper prices also meant old mines with deteriorating infrastructure became valuable again. The Legion of Christ also experienced unprecedented growth and success in a very short period of time. The congregation found a “niche” where old-fashioned discipline and a strict understanding of the evangelical counsels combined with the ability to attract leaders and raise funds enabled them to recruit 800 priests and 2,500 major and minor seminarians, with houses in 22 countries. Regnum Christi has a membership of about 70,000 youths, adults, deacons and priests in more than 30 countries. It is said that charitable works make up about \$50 million of the Legion's \$650 million yearly budget. A network of twenty-one ‘Mano Amiga’ (Helping Hands) schools serve 13,000 poor children, whose parents pay about \$20 a month in tuition. Regnum Christi members started, and continue, to drive many of Mexico's leading charitable efforts, such as an extraordinarily successful Telethon for disadvantaged children, and a supermarket program where customers round their bill up, to donate money for a national food bank. In El Salvador, the Congregation built entire small towns for disaster victims, complete with schools, churches and medical facilities. I know that the President of at least one country is a member of Regnum Christi.

Now the Legionaries, in a sense, are trapped, awaiting the outcome of the Church's rescue mission with which they will need to collaborate in a great sense of trust. Like the situation of the miners some facets of the rescue are within their control. But the key to their survival is also in the hands of “outside” rescuers.

## **The San José Mine**

The 33 Chilean miners were trapped on 5 August by a massive collapse in the roof of the San Jose mine, located outside the northern Chilean city of Copiapó. The miners have already endured an amount of time trapped underground unprecedented in modern memory. The San Jose mine had been closed twice for safety violations and multiple fatalities. Fr. Maciel, the founder of the Legion, was accused of violations in the 1950s of which he was exonerated - under circumstances, which in the light of what we now know, must be considered dubious.



For two weeks, a series of probes has tunneled hundreds of meters trying to find the refuge where the miners were thought to be gathered. They repeatedly missed their mark,

and officials began blaming the mine for not operating with updated maps or modern safety equipment.

The miners are stuck 700 meters (2,300 feet) below the surface waiting for a drilling machine that to excavate up to 20 meters (65 feet) per day -- and for the initial shaft being drilled to be doubled in diameter to permit each one to be pulled up. The escape tunnel will be about 26 inches (66 centimeters) wide — the diameter of a typical bicycle wheel — and stretch for more than 2,200 feet (688 meters) through solid rock. Miners will have to be no more than 35 inches (90 centimeters) around the waist to make it out of the tunnel.

Some mining experts believe it could take less than the estimated four months to dig the rescue tunnel. If drilling goes as planned the survivors will then face the ordeal of squeezing into a tubular, metal cage for three hours as they are slowly pulled up one at a time. Meanwhile, water, food and other supplies are being dropped through three fist-sized shafts drilled to the men. Authorities have started vaccinating the trapped men against tetanus, diphtheria, flu and pneumonia to prevent outbreaks of disease.

Many concerned onlookers of the Legion's dilemmas are hoping for swift resolution. For the naysayers who advocate the suppression of the congregation, too much time has passed already. My take is that the process of healing the congregation from the dastardly effects of the founder's conduct will take time.

## **Emergent Leadership**

Among the first things to happen in such dire predicaments has already happened in the mine. The miners appointed leaders among themselves. This process is referred to as "emergent leadership." In times of crisis a person's rank or official standing has less to do with leadership than competence does. The person with the "right" competencies for the job at hand emerges from the group.

Other normal, everyday leadership attributes such as popularity, likeability, and powers of persuasion are replaced by competence for the particular task. The most competent people lead. One of the greatest challenges faced by the Legionaries is that – in my estimation – individual Legionaries do not know each other. Each man is an island, cut off from the deepest thoughts and feelings of his peers. This does not facilitate the process of "emergent" leadership. Maybe as they now endure feelings of claustrophobia and being "trapped" they will force themselves to leave their individual islands and break with the awful culture that isolated them, from each other and the outside world.



### **The challenge: learning to talk and to listen**

Just a couple of days ago, a former colleague of mine, whom I had not been in touch with for almost 40 years since he left the Legion, read my book and decided to call me. He said, “What if, when you and I were 25, we could have sat down, had a beer and told

each other what we really thought about our life in the Legion?” He concluded that we would probably have left. I added, “Or we would have rebelled and demanded the necessary changes.” But Legionaries don’t talk to each other. That’s a huge, endemic challenge they need to remedy before they can hope to achieve change.

On the psychological level, the miners have to deal with physical misery, separation from the outside world (especially their families), uncertainty and ambiguity about the future. Not unlike the Legionaries predicament. In this situation, the concept of “trust” is especially important. For instance, if the miners do not perceive the rescuers as to be entirely forthcoming, they could lose their trust. This could produce the disastrous consequence of uniting the trapped men against the people running the rescue operation. Too little information from leaders who are not physically present causes discontent and distrust.

It is absolutely vital that the authorities on the outside do not lose the trust of the miners trapped a half mile below ground. I would suggest there is a parallel with the Legionaries. The miners are all poor, and the company that owns the mine is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. So the miners are worried about the safety and well-being of their loved ones, and are powerless to help. They only have a very general idea of how long the rescue may take. The rescue team isn’t ready to let families talk directly with the miners yet. To survive, they will need to trust each other, their immediate leaders and the “distant” leaders on the outside.

I don’t want to force the analogy of the Legion and the trapped miners. But as I read the news stories about the predicaments of both groups I find myself making connections. In both instances, trust, communication and adjustment to the indications of the “outsiders,” and the need for emergent leadership strike me as interesting parallels. Obviously, there is no real comparison with men who are trapped a half mile below the surface of the earth. However, I suspect many men feel “trapped” in the Legion. Leaving the congregation is not as simple an option as it might seem to people who have not experienced religious life. Neither is transition to the diocesan priesthood or to another Congregation. Most, I think, will want to redefine and fix whatever it was that attracted them in the first place. Then it will take a huge amount of prayer and trust to fight the feelings of claustrophobia as they claw their way along whatever rescue tunnel they and the Vatican come up with. To do this, they will have to learn to talk to each other and discover the notion of "trust."