

Apostolics cause Catholics to pull videotape

Anonymous benefactor 'crushed' by priests' failure to disclose past

By DAN BARRY
Journal Inquirer Staff Writer

A firm specializing in Catholic educational materials has halted production and distribution of a videocassette after learning that two priests appearing on the tape had been key members of a Somers group that was banned last year from the Norwich diocese.

A spokesman for the company said the discovery of the roles of the Rev. Martin Lucia and the Rev. Donald Higgins in the Apostolic Formation Center for Christian Renew-All also has led to the closing of a religious organization the priests had set up in Lyndhurst, N.J.

Both actions apparently come at a high cost to a New Jersey man who spent almost \$750,000 on the tapes and the priests' organization to promote "perpetual adoration," the practice in some Catholic churches of having parishioners maintain a round-the-clock vigil in front of the Blessed Sacrament — the consecrated communion wafer that Catholics believe to be the body and blood of Christ.

The benefactor is "crushed" by the episode and the two priests' failure to tell him of their past, according to James Donovan, a spokesman for Keep The Faith Inc., a New Jersey corporation that sells Catholic materials nationwide.

Donovan, who refused to identify the donor, helped write the 45-minute videotape entitled "This Sacrament of Love." He said that 100,000 copies of the tape were manufactured earlier this year and were advertised in more than 100 newspapers across the country.

85,000 copies scrapped

About 15,000 copies already had been sold or given away by late last month, when the company discovered the priests' link with the Apostolic Formation Center, Donovan said. He added that the remaining 85,000 tapes are no longer available.

"We made the decision to yank the tape, to stop distribution," Donovan said. "Thank God we nipped it in the bud."

Donovan said Lucia and Higgins also had set up the Perpetual Adoration Apostolate in Lyndhurst, which depended on the same donor's finances to operate.

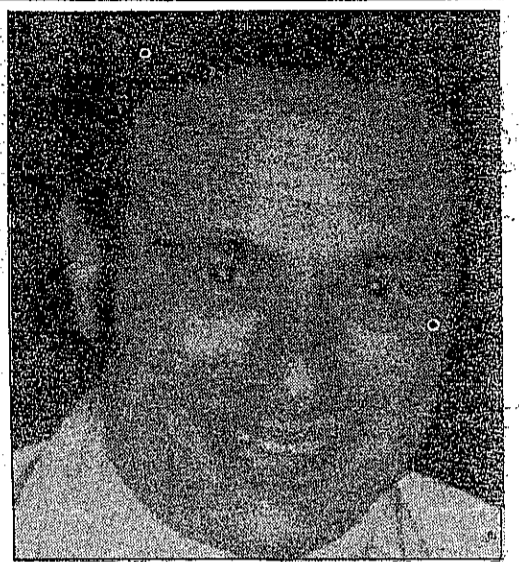
But he said, "The benefactor has pulled out the rug from under them."

A telephone message left on the Perpetual Adoration Apostolate's answering machine has not been returned.

Lucia especially has gained a national reputation for helping to establish perpetual adoration in more than 200 American parishes, as well as in Europe, Africa and the Philippines.



Apostolics The Rev. Martin Lucia, right, and The Rev. Donald Higgins appearances on videotape caused it to be pulled from distribution.



He and Higgins lived at the Apostolic Formation Center in Somers and were close advisers to J. Roy Legere, the former delicatessen clerk who established the organization in 1968 to encourage Catholics to take more active roles in promoting their faith.

The group became very popular in the early 1970s, with dozens of followers moving to Somers to be closer to Legere and his center, which operated out of a former woolen mill magnate's mansion in the town's Somersville section.

Group banned from diocese

But Norwich Bishop Daniel P. Reilly last June banned the organization, which by then had changed its name to the Mary Queen of Apostles Formation Center, from his diocese.

Reilly acted after receiving dozens of complaints from ex-members that the center distorted Catholic doctrine and had become a destructive cult, with a minority of its followers believing the Second Coming of Christ would be in Somers.

The bishop also had been told that Legere, who died in 1978, and some men in his inner group of advisers had engaged in a homosexual ritual called the "Divine Intimacy of the Holy Seed," which Legere claimed was a way of "sharing" Christ.

The presence of Higgins and Lucia in the center gave Legere's sometimes bizarre teachings an aura of legitimacy, according to ex-members, who say the priests helped to foster the notion that Legere was divine and supported his often apocalyptic teachings.

Higgins and Lucia also encouraged activities that the Catholic church frowns upon. For example, they supported Legere's decision to have his adherents shun at least one ex-member, Eva Dauphin, and helped to circulate rumors that she was possessed by the devil.

Last December, Dauphin publicly criticized Lucia, Higgins and two other priests who were based at the center, saying some of them had violated the confidentiality of confessions — among the most serious charges that can be leveled against a priest — to keep Legere informed of his followers' activities.

Dan Jeter, a Georgia Protestant who once was married to an Apostolic, also said last fall he too had been labeled as being possessed. Jeter said he awoke one night while living in Somers to find Higgins in his bedroom praying over him.

Legere kicked Lucia, who had been one of his closest spiritual advisers, out of the apostolate in 1978 after an apparent falling-out.

Within a year Lucia was promoting perpetual adoration.

Higgins, though, was still at the center in 1983 when word of the homosexual ritual was leaked to the general membership.

In at least two cases he met with members and justified the "divine intimacy" as a holy act, according to Catholics who subsequently quit the formation center.

"God is above his own law and could ask this to be done," one ex-member recalled Higgins telling her.

Higgins and two other priests left the center and the diocese at Reilly's behest in the summer of 1983. Higgins went to a Virginia parish before becoming the national director of the Perpetual Adoration Apostolate, headquartered in Lyndhurst.

Priests' past a 'black mark'

In the videotape that Keep The Faith Inc. pulled off the market last month, Lucia gives a 20-minute lecture on the need for perpetual adoration, and Higgins explains several steps to follow to establish a Perpetual Adoration group in a parish.

Former members of the Apostolic Formation Center became aware of the priests' latest activities last month, when one of them received one of the videocassette at his home. Included with the tape was a form letter from Howard J. Walsh, Keep the Faith's director, imploring that the tape be studied because the cup of God's wrath "is starting to overflow."

Walsh's letter, which named Lucia and Higgins as among those appearing on the tape, also contained an appeal for a tax-deductible donation of at least \$10 for the videocassette.

Donovan said the center's former member telephoned him and warned him of the priests' role in the Somers cult. He said he then received calls from at least two other ex-members detailing Lucia and Higgins' involvement.

He added that their stories were corroborated in a subsequent meeting between Keep The Faith representatives and the Rev. John A. Hardon, a Jesuit theologian who had investigated the Apostolics on behalf of Reilly.

The company then decided to halt production of the tape, and the benefactor withdrew his support of the apostolate, Donovan said.

"It was hard for us to swallow," he said. "It's a shame because we're not a fast money-making operation."

"Everyone here is devastated."

Donovan said the company had received calls from people who claimed to have been "really moved" by the videocassette. But he said the company had decided to pull the tape to protect itself "spiritually and legally."

"This is a dangerous thing," Donovan said. "It's a black mark on perpetual adoration, and that's just what the Old Boy wants" — an apparent reference to Satan.

Donovan said he hasn't heard from Lucia or Higgins since.

"I don't know what's going to happen to those two guys," he said. "God knows."