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The Peruvian bishops' conference is pictured in an undated photo. In an Oct. 21, 2024, letter posted on the Peruvian bishops' conference website, the apostolic nunciature in Peru announced that Pope Francis has expelled two more members and upheld the expulsion of one member of the controversial lay movement Sodalitium Christianae Vitae due to allegations of sexual abuse, abuse of power and financial malfeasance. It said the decision was made after the pope evaluated allegations revealed during a Vatican investigation of the movement last year. (OSV News/courtesy Peruvian bishops' conference)

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Pope Francis has expelled two more members and upheld the expulsion of one member of the controversial lay movement Sodalitium Christianae Vitae due to allegations of sexual abuse, abuse of power and financial malfeasance.

In a letter dated Oct. 21 and posted on the Peruvian bishops' conference website, the apostolic nunciature in Peru announced that the decision was made after the pope evaluated allegations revealed during a Vatican investigation last year.

The investigation, dubbed as a "special mission," was conducted in July 2023 by Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta and Msgr. Jordi Bertomeu, officials of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, who traveled to Peru to meet with victims of Sodalitium, the movements' leaders and journalists who uncovered the abuses within the group.

As a result of the investigation, Luis Fernando Figari, Sodalitium's founder, was expelled from the group in August.

On Sept. 25, the nunciature announced the expulsion of 10 members, including Peruvian Archbishop José Antonio Eguren of Piura, a professed member of Sodalitium since 1981 who resigned from leading the archdiocese in April, and Peruvian journalist Alejandro Bermudez, founder and former executive director of Catholic News Agency, which is now owned by EWTN. Bermudez parted ways with EWTN in

December 2022.

Using identical words that were in a Sept. 25 statement, the nunciature said Oct. 21 the pope "evaluated the defenses corresponding to the allegations that emerged during the 'special mission,'" including "abuse of office and authority, particularly in the form of abuse in the administration of ecclesiastical goods, as well as sexual abuse, in some cases even of minors."

"In taking such a decision, the scandal was considered due to the number and seriousness of the abuses denounced by the victims, which were particularly contrary to the balanced and liberating experience of the evangelical counsels within the context of the ecclesial apostolate," the nunciature stated.

Among the members expelled Oct. 21 were José Andrés Ambrozic Velezmoro, the former vicar general of Sodalitium and a former assistant of the lay movement's founder Figari, who was expelled earlier due to accusations of sexual and psychological abuse made against him.

A priest, Father Luis Antonio Ferroggiaro Dentone, was also expelled from the group due to accusations of sexual abuse of minors. The nunciature said that Ferroggiaro's expulsion "does not preclude the proceedings that are simultaneously being carried out in the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, given the clerical status of the accused."

The letter also stated that the pope upheld the expulsion of Ricardo Adolfo Trenemann Young, a former superior of the group who was among those expelled in September.

"Pope Francis, together with the bishops of Peru and of those places where the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae is present, saddened by what has happened, asks forgiveness from the victims and is united with them in their suffering. Likewise, they implore this society of apostolic life to initiate, without further delay, a path of justice and reparation," the nunciature said.

The announcement of more expulsions was hailed by Peruvian journalist Paola Ugaz, who along with Pedro Salinas, a journalist who said he was abused by Figari, co-wrote a book titled, "Mitad Monjes, Mitad Soldados" ("Half Monks, Half Soldiers"), which detailed the alleged psychological and sexual abuse, as well as corporal punishment and extreme exercises, that young members of Sodalitium were forced

to endure.

Ugaz and Salinas were sued in 2019 by Eguren, who was accused of involvement in abuse cover-up operations waged by the religious group. The prelate later dropped the lawsuits after facing considerable backlash from the public and the Peruvian bishops' conference.

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In a message sent to OSV News Sept. 21, Ugaz said the new round of expulsions brought some sense of justice to survivors and those persecuted by the group, which she said "did whatever it wanted with total impunity."

"It is a very important day and I thank Pope Francis, Archbishop Robert Prevost (former bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, and current prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops), (Cardinal) Pedro Barreto Jimeno (of Huancayo, Peru) and the Scicluna-Bertomeu mission for bringing hope to the survivors who had lost it," she said.

"It is a great day for someone like me, a Peruvian and a victim of a difficult persecution who is not used to justice and hope," Ugaz added. "Today is different. It is a great moment for me and Pedro Salinas, who started the investigation (of Sodalitium) at the end of 2010."

While the decision was praised by victims, some felt that expelling members wasn't enough and called for the Vatican to dissolve the lay movement.

In a post published on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), José Enrique Escardó, one of the first survivors to publicly denounce the abuses within Sodalitium, said the expulsions were "still insufficient" and that "those expelled must be brought before the civil justice system and prosecuted for their crimes."

"With these expulsions, the church only continues to give the same message: 'Sodalitium is good, we just have to get rid of the rotten apples.' And that is not the case," he said Oct. 21.

Several Peruvian bishops have also called for the movement's dissolution. In an interview with Peruvian radio station Radio Santa Rosa in March 2020, Barreto said that the number of cases of sexual and physical abuses, as well as financial

irregularities, within Sodalitium could not be ignored.

"Personally, I think that when a religious organization has committed a crime, because it has to be said that way — from the point of view of sexual abuse and the economic side where there are also problems — it has to be dissolved," he said.

In an op-ed published Oct. 19 in the Spanish newspaper El País, Peruvian Cardinal-designate Carlos Castillo Mattasoglio of Lima issued a scathing criticism of Sodalitium, saying it was founded as a "political project" meant to bring about the "resurrection of fascism in Latin America."

"The use of religion for purposes other than the extension of the good news of Jesus is the most destructive thing for the Catholic Church," Castillo said. "Therefore, I have come to the conclusion that there is no charism in Sodalitium. There is only a charism when the person receives a gift of the spirit for the whole Church and his works are good."

"Sodalitium and other groups founded by Figari cannot be saved because they were born evil and their results over the last 50 years prove this," the cardinal said, adding that the movement served as a "machine for destroying people" and used faith to "conceal its crimes and its ambition for political and economic domination."

"There is nothing spontaneous in its members. There is no freedom and without that, there is no faith," he said. "As a failed experiment, it should be suppressed by the church."