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# Josef Seifert, Pure Logic, and the Beginning of the Official Persecution of Orthodoxy within the Church\*

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### Abstract

In this article, we show that the presupposition behind the recent decision of the Archbishop of Granada to dismiss Prof. Josef Seifert from his position at the “Dietrich von Hildebrand Chair for Realist Phenomenology” at the IAP-IFES for criticizing one paragraph of *Amoris Laetitia* (no. 303) is a false one. In fact, it is based on the assumption that the doctrine contained in this paragraph and its immediate context, which seems to contradict the doctrine of *Veritatis Splendor* about the existence of acts which are intrinsically wrong (*intrinsece malum*), could now be considered as a part of the authentic Magisterium of the Church, and therefore to call it into doubt would be a sin against the Papacy and the communion of the Church. In the light of this, by the official punishment of a Catholic thinker for the sole crime of defending an orthodox doctrine, it is confirmed, and thrown into clear relief, that the Catholic Church is suffering from a practical schism, because of grave errors that have been introduced into a papal document.

As is already widely known, Professor Josef Seifert, one of the most outstanding Catholic philosophers of our day, has recently been dismissed by the Archbishop of Granada (Spain) from his position at the International Academy of Philosophy (IAP), an institution he himself founded for the purpose of defending philosophical truth, and thereby also defending Catholic metaphysical and moral teaching.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Maïke Hickson: “Spanish Archbishop Fires Professor Seifert for *Amoris Laetitia* Critique, <http://www.webcitation.org/6tNDPDgAD>.

The Granada Campus of the Academy, originally based exclusively in the Principality of Liechtenstein, is now divided into different campuses, one of which, in virtue of an academic agreement and its funding, depends on the authority of the Archbishop of Granada, Javier Martínez, insofar as its presence in Granada is concerned.<sup>2</sup>

The cause for so grave a decision on the part of the archbishop is the recent but already famous short article by Prof. Seifert, published in this review,<sup>3</sup> commenting one paragraph of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*:

“Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal.”<sup>4</sup>

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And: “The Church After *Amoris Laetitia*: An Interview With Josef Seifert”, <http://www.webcitation.org/6tNGW7mAR>.

<sup>2</sup>More specifically, Josef Seifert was, until a few days ago, holder of the “Dietrich von Hildebrand Chair for Realist Phenomenology” at the IAP-IFES. The IFES (Instituto de Filosofía Edith Stein) of Granada was created by the same Archbishop Martínez, in friendship and collaboration with Prof. Seifert.

<sup>3</sup>“Does pure Logic threaten to destroy the entire moral Doctrine of the Catholic Church?”, Aemaet *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* <http://aemaet.de>, ISSN 2195-173X

<sup>4</sup>*Amoris Laetitia*, 303. Seifert adds: “From the previous as well as from the later context it is clear that this “will of God” here refers to continuing to live in what constitutes objectively a grave sin.” (“Does pure Logic...”, p. 6, my emphasis). It may be noted that this is also implied within the same sentence, which says that we are speaking of a situation that “doesn’t correspond object-

The whole of *AL*, and particularly Chapter viii, contains a number of discussed points, that many critics have even identified as heresies<sup>5</sup>. However, in my view, the principal merit of Seifert's short article has been to highlight, in this single sentence, what is by far its most profound weakness, a potential source of the destruction of the whole moral teaching of the Church and even of all natural Law.

It is important to stress that this affirmation of *AL* cannot fall under the main argument used by the defenders of the Exhortation (e.g. Buttiglione, Fernández), namely that the text is just giving due importance to the subjective side of the moral action, as a complement to the objective side. According to this line of defence, *Veritatis Splendor's* doctrine that there are acts which are intrinsically wrong (*intrinsece mala*) refers to the objective side of the action, while *AL* only takes into account that a person could be, subjectively, not guilty of the sin (or at least of mortal sin).

But here, as Seifert comments: "(...) besides calling an objective state of grave sin, euphemistically, 'not yet fully the objective ideal', *AL* says that we can know with 'a certain moral security' that God himself asks us to continue to commit intrinsically wrong acts, such as adultery or active homosexuality"<sup>6</sup>.

Then Seifert goes on to show, with a simple application of pure logic, that, if this claim of *AL's* were true, God could be said to ask, under some circumstances, any kind of evil action, thus con-

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ively to the *demands of the Gospel*" (a clear reference to the indissolubility of marriage).

<sup>5</sup>See for example the discussion that has taken place in Rome, at the international Congress "Make clarity" ("Fare chiarezza") on April 22, 2017: <http://www.webcitation.org/6tN09WHiR>.

<sup>6</sup>"Does pure logic...", p. 6. My emphasis.

tradicting all of his Ten Commandments and the whole of Natural Law. Note that we are clearly *not* talking here of the subjective side of the action, that could diminish responsibility (such as absence of *full knowledge* or awareness of an action), because the text makes a clear reference precisely to *knowledge*: one can *know*, according to *AL*, and know “with a certain *moral security*”, that this is precisely “what God *asks*”. So, it is not a question of diminished subjective responsibility of an action that still remains, in itself, gravely wrong; it is a question of calling *objectively good*, (because God could certainly not *ask* something that is not *objectively good*) something that is *objectively bad*.

This point made clear, we could see as fully justified the claim that “here we have a moral theological atomic bomb that threatens to tear down the whole moral edifice of the 10 commandments and of Catholic Moral Teaching”.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, I may add, this affirmation of *AL* introduces a direct contradiction into the very foundations of Ethics, calling *objectively good* what it at same time calls *objectively bad*, and thereby makes contradictory the relation between God and moral Law, thus attacking the very notion of God Himself.

However, Prof. Seifert does not go on to make this claim, but puts it in a hypothetical way, and simply leaves it to the Pope, or to the reader, to decide if this danger is real<sup>8</sup>. Finally, he pleads with the Pope, *if* he should recognize that this is the case, to re-

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<sup>7</sup>“Does pure logic...”, p. 5. My emphasis.

<sup>8</sup>“Does pure logic...”, p. 5: “On the contrary, I will leave it entirely to the Pope or to any reader to answer the question whether or not there is at least one affirmation in *Amoris Laetitia* that has the logical consequence of destroying the entire Catholic moral teaching.” As a humble reader, I do think the consequence he prospects as a hypothesis is, in fact, completely necessary.

tract at least this affirmation<sup>9</sup>. So, notwithstanding the force and cogency of his argument, Seifert does not draw himself apodictically the consequences (which would be equivalent to detect a material heresy), but rather leaves it to the Pope to reflect about such a grave matter. What could be thought of as more humble and respectful?

Now, precisely this article has led Archbishop Martínez to affirm that: “the article recently published by Professor Josef Seifert (...) damages the communion of the Church, confuses the faith of the faithful, and sows distrust toward the successor of Peter, which, in the end, does not serve the truth of faith, but, rather, the interests of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

With all due respect, I think that, by affirming this, Archbishop Martínez displays a truly surprising naiveté in his consideration of the present situation of the Church. Surprising, indeed, because he certainly is not only a high prelate, but also a highly educated person.

First of all, in order to affirm that someone is “damaging the communion of the Church” in some matter, one must previously assume that some kind of communion, regarding the subject we are discussing, actually exists in the Church. Now, what bishop, what priest, what educated and informed person in the Catholic Church today is unaware that there exists no subject at present more disputed and submerged in such horrifying confusion as this one? In which matter, I ask, is “the faith of the faithful” more confused by the most contradictory voices as a consequence of

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<sup>9</sup>See page 8.

<sup>10</sup>Nota del Arzobispado de Granada, 31 de agosto de 2017 (tr. Maïke Hickson): <http://www.webcitation.org/6tNDPDgAD>.

the publication of *AL*?

Someone could object that the confusion already existed before *AL*: yes, but the huge problem with *AL* is that relativistic currents of thought and “situation ethics”, which the previous three Popes had tried hard to stop, have now surreptitiously *entered the pages of an official papal document*. Things have thus reached the point that one of the most outstanding and lucid defenders of the previous Magisterium during more than three decades, personally supported and encouraged in his philosophical enterprise by St. John Paul II as one of his most precious allies in the defence of the infallible moral doctrine of the Church, Josef Seifert, is now dismissed and treated as an enemy of the communion of the same Church.

Equally unjustified and naïve, I think, is the affirmation that Seifert “sows distrust toward the successor of Peter”. Archbishop Martínez seems to be unaware of what is as evident as what we said before: by allowing into an official document affirmations that are contradictory to essential points of the previous Magisterium, and of the millenary doctrine of the Church, Pope Francis has directly thrown upon himself the utter distrust of an immense number of faithful Catholics. The disastrous consequence is that distrust is thereby thrown, in the minds of many, upon the Papacy itself.

So, what is the real cause of this distrust? Can it really be Josef Seifert’s solid and consistent effort to oppose the error of situation ethics, a commitment to which he has devoted almost his entire life and that of the institution he founded, in faithful service to the Church and to the Word of God? Or must it not be due to the fact that this very error, contrary to the whole Christian tradition (a tradition so recently reaffirmed in an Encyclical

as solemn and important as *Veritatis Splendor*) has now been allowed to creep into a papal document?

In the third place, we must make clear that *AL*'s suggestion on this topic (namely that objective adulterers could now in some cases *not* be considered objective adulterers) can in no way be considered true Magisterium, even though it appears on the pages of a magisterial document. To suppose that it could, I think, would be to assume a rather mechanical and oversimplified concept of the Magisterium: namely, that something is "being taught" by a Pope, only because it appears, in some way or other, in an Apostolic Exhortation<sup>11</sup>. In fact, there is clear evidence in the Exhortation itself and in the subsequent actions of Pope Francis, that this is not the case. At the very beginning, *AL* clearly states that "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues *need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium*. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but *this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it*. (...) Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For "cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied" (*AL* 3, my emphasis). Now, precisely since our topic is the crucial question which the Pope foresees is bound to be called into discussion, it is clear that in order to avoid discussion about the orthodoxy of his proposal, he presents it in an indirect and "discreet" way. This is so true,

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<sup>11</sup>This is for example assumed by Victor Manuel Fernández, in his last article ("El capítulo VIII de *Amoris Laetitia*: lo que queda después de la tormenta", in: *Medellin*, vol. XLIII, No. 168, Mayo - Agosto 2017, pp. 449-468), by Rocco Buttiglione and in general by the defenders of *AL*.



that he explicitly recognizes that what is here proposed may legitimately be substituted by “*another way of interpreting* some aspects of that teaching or *drawing certain consequences* of it” (my emphasis). Now, this is of course very different from anything that could be considered a “magisterial teaching”: not only does a statement like this preclude any attempt to considering *AL*’s doctrine an *infallible teaching*, but it also precludes considering it even as *authentic magisterium*, at least in those parts that present novelties or even contradictions to the previous Magisterium.

Consistently with this statement of *AL* 3, the Pope has not offered any objections to the declarations of those bishops who have pleaded their fidelity to *Veritatis Splendor* and *Familiaris Consortio* (as in Poland, USA, Canada and Argentina). Archbishop Martínez says that: “The Diocese of Granada has adopted, from the very beginning, the application of the pontifical text prepared by the Bishops of the Region of Buenos Aires, recognized by the Holy Father”. Very good: but this has been *his* decision: other bishops have made the opposite decision, and have not been censured by the Pope. It is true that in his letter to the bishops of Buenos Aires the Pope states that “there is no other interpretation”<sup>12</sup>; but in fact he has accepted the existence of other interpretations and has not censured them, consistently with what he had affirmed in *AL* 3.

So, what we are witnessing here is a attempt to “magisterialize” the proposal of *AL* viii, which is contrary to the evidence

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<sup>12</sup>Obispos de la Región Pastoral de Buenos Aires. *Criterios básicos para la aplicación del capítulo VIII de Amoris Laetitia*. Buenos Aires, 05 de septiembre de 2016, punto 6. See the whole text in <http://www.webcitation.org/6tNUQiWpf>

See the Pope’s letter in: <http://www.webcitation.org/6tNUVMpJk>.

offered by *AL* itself, and to the course of action of the Pope himself. It should be noted that Martínez is following here the course proposed by Archbishop Fernández in his recent article: Archbishop Fernández assumes that this proposal is an act of the Magisterium, and tries to confirm this by quoting the same letter of the Pope to the Buenos Aires bishops, thus implicitly assuming that this letter is an additional act of the Magisterium<sup>13</sup>.

I reply: a letter that merely confirms the reception of a proposal, that cannot in itself present the credentials of the magisterial, cannot, for the same reason, be magisterium. It is merely a confirmation of the mind of the Pope on this matter. But what the Pope thinks or says is very far from being, *ipso facto*, magisterial.<sup>14</sup> There must be, clearly expressed, an intention of authoritatively teaching, and *not* of suggesting only one possible interpretation as is explicitly said in *AL* 3. Furthermore, there must also be, of course, a clear harmony and coherence with the rest of the Magisterium.

In this sense it is completely true to affirm, with the so-called “orthodox interpretation of *AL*”<sup>15</sup>, that even suspending our judgement on whether the Pope as a person has fallen into error, no interpretation contrary to previous solemn and ordinary teaching

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<sup>13</sup>“El capítulo VIII de *Amoris Laetitia...*”, 451.

<sup>14</sup>Fernández mentions as a parallel a letter written by Pope Pius IX to the German bishops to confirm their interpretation of Vatican I, later mentioned in a note of *Lumen Gentium* 27 (“El capítulo VIII de *Amoris Laetitia...*”, 452). The obvious difference with the present situation is, as we say, that Vatican I *did* have magisterial authority on the point disputed, and so the letter’s value was based on a truly orthodox doctrine.

<sup>15</sup>See for example Francisco José Delgado, *La contradicción de la interpretación heterodoxa de Amoris Laetitia* (at infocatolica, 23.08.2017), who effectively refutes Archbishop Fernández’s article.

of the Church may be correctly extracted from the document.

What we would like to add, however, is that although the true Magisterium of the Church can never itself be altered by what a Pope personally thinks and says, because it rests on Jesus Christ's promise and protection, still, an erroneous personal opinion of the Pope can have devastating effects, mainly because many people, at all levels, will inevitably tend to make a confusion between "Magisterium" and "what the Pope says".

This is precisely what is happening today with the dismissal of Prof. Seifert from the IAP in Granada. Here, in fact, the Archbishop of Granada is *officially* persecuting a most orthodox Catholic thinker, precisely on the assumption that "what the Pope says" in *AL* viii is an act of the Magisterium. For, evidently, to criticize the Pope for something that he says as a private person could not in the least suffice for the accusation of "damaging the communion of the Church, confusing the faith of the faithful, and sowing distrust toward the successor of Peter".

So, Josef Seifert is not simply one more of the list of orthodox thinkers discriminated against for their orthodoxy. Of such people we could find many examples in the Church, not only in the past four years, but also in the past decades. Rather we have here something more: not a simple discrimination (which would need some kind of pretext to hide its true motives), but an *official persecution* based on a papal document. It would be hard, in modern Church history, to find another example of this. We would have rather to go back to the ancient christological controversies, when entire and vital sections of the Church – sometimes including the Papacy – were captured by heresy and thus perse-

cuted the orthodox<sup>16</sup>.

In conclusion, even while we criticise Granada's Archbishop for the unjust punishment he has inflicted upon Prof. Seifert<sup>17</sup>, we must in a sense also be grateful to him. By officially punishing a Catholic thinker for the sole crime of being orthodox, he unwittingly confirms, and throws into clear relief, the *practical schism* we are suffering from in the Catholic Church, because of grave errors that have managed to creep into a papal document.

So, now, not only can someone who is a public adulterer in Philadelphia automatically become, having moved to Chicago, a good Catholic who does "what God asks of him", but, as Pure Logic dictates in consequence, a thinker who is a faithful defender of orthodoxy in Vaduz, can be punished in Granada as a menace to ecclesiastical communion and an enemy of the Pope.

But this, of course, could not happen without the Pope himself actively contributing to the confusion between the Magisterium and his private opinions.

In the light of this, it is all the more necessary and urgent that some kind of "formal", or, maybe better, "filial" correction to the Pope, finally appear. And may God grant the Holy Father an open heart to hear it.

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<sup>16</sup>See for example Claudio Pierantoni, "The Arian crisis and the current controversy about Amoris laetitia: a parallel". *Aemaet*, 5(2), 250-278, <http://www.aemaet.de/index.php/aemaet/article/view/40>.

<sup>17</sup>See the declarations of a group of Catholic scholars (including myself), published by Maïke Hickson a few days ago: "Catholic Scholars React to Dismissal of Josef Seifert Over Exhortation Critique" <http://www.webcitation.org/6tNUPLbYq>.