

FR. MANNERS

by Matthew Schmitz

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Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I fell asleep at your book talk . . .

Were Fr. James Martin, SJ to appear opposite me in the confessional, I would be tempted to make this frivolous admission—and if his agenda prevails in the Church, I will have reason to make it. Catholics distinguish between violations of manners and of the moral law. Fr. Martin, in ways trivial and grave, does not. In his account of the faith, the sin that Christians once called sodomy is no more serious than my nodding off as he spoke gentle words at the Church of St. Francis Xavier on a warm June afternoon.

Fr. Martin was discussing his new book, *Building a Bridge*, which is a kind of etiquette manual for the modern Church. His

previous books include *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* and *The Abbey: A Voyage of Discovery*, a novel advertised as being “in the tradition of the spiritual classics *The Shack* and *The Screwtape Letters*.” Perhaps most impressively, Fr. Martin has had a collection of his “essential writings” published by Orbis Press in its *Modern Spiritual Masters Series* — a list in which he is placed alongside John Henry Newman, Therese of Lisieux, Edith Stein, and Mother Teresa.

In *Building a Bridge*, our spiritual master looks back fondly on a genteel past. “Not too long ago,” he writes, “opposing factions would interact with one another politely.” Despite tensions, a “quiet courtesy and tacit respect prevailed.” He hopes to reintroduce such refinement to Catholic circles, especially where debate rages over homosexuality.

The Catechism tells Catholics to treat homosexual people with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity.” Fr. Martin extracts this claim and turns it against certain other claims in the same text. For example, the Catechism’s contention that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” is insensitive and so needs to be scrapped. We must be nice, this he knows, for the Catechism tells him so.

Before I nodded off during that talk in June, I heard Fr. Martin criticize Catholic institutions that fire employees who enter into gay marriages. In his view, gay marriages are less disruptive and damnable than simple rudeness. “If I came in here and spat on the floor every day, if I punched someone in the face, they’d say we don’t do that here.” Rather than fire people for entering same-sex marriages, “we should fire people for

being mean.” (He has also expressed this view on social media, where he often complains about the bad manners and poor spelling of those with whom he disagrees.)

As with any brief for politeness, there is a class element to Fr. Martin’s campaign. Any poor and ignorant fool can abide by a prescription as blunt and sharply defined as a prohibition against gay marriage. But only someone who has enjoyed the advantages of leisure and cultivation will be able to avoid meanness and lowness altogether. Moral prohibitions often seem unnecessary to elites whose private virtue requires no public support. The rest of humanity has need of clear dos and don'ts. By removing the Church from the culture war, Fr. Martin puts it on the wrong side of the class war.

Of course, this is not what he intends. Fr. Martin notably seeks peace. He speaks reassuring phrases in soothing tones. He prefers the familiarity of a sweater vest and dad jeans to the strangeness of the soutane. In ways superficial and profound, he seeks to render Christianity inoffensive. At a certain level, I understand this desire. The Church may be a sign of contradiction, but it is also a source of consolation. Sometimes we need a Church built on sharp, gothic lines, and at other moments we seek the calm harmony of the classical.

But Fr. Martin’s proposed renovation goes beyond mere ornament, to require the restructuring of the whole Christian edifice. Fr. Martin never says this outright, but the logic of what he does say demands it. Approval of homosexuality is now considered the bare minimum of politeness in the world's respectable precincts (where one hundred years ago, it would

have been thought intolerably rude). If Christianity is to have the manners Fr. Martin values—if it is to exhibit perfect “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” in the eyes of the world—it must not only change its phrasing but reverse its teaching on sex.

Fr. Martin is no idle vandal of the Church, even if his critics often take him for one. Though I disagree with his conclusions, I believe that Catholics have something to learn from his argument that the Church treats homosexuality unfairly.

Catholic teaching has not changed, but at the practical level the Church today has made peace with heterosexual desire. Praise of virginity and warnings against lust in the marriage bed have given way to anxious reassurances that Catholics do not hate and fear sex. The Church has largely ceased to speak of sex as dangerous and requiring restraint, even where it is licit. We hear of the dangers of pre-marital sex, of extramarital sex, sometimes even of homosexual sex—but very rarely of sex simply.

I spoke recently with a few of the most prominent defenders of the Christian prohibition on homosexual acts. These men also reject contraception, which anyone who would censure homosexual acts [must do](#). Yet even they take a relatively sunny view of desire. Their contention is that a man and wife may perform with a clean conscience any and every sodomitical act, so long as it is a prelude to consummation. A hadith from their master sums up the idea: “You can drive wherever you like, so long as you park in the garage.” Without descending into the anatomical and philosophical details, it is fair to say that this

represents a more optimistic view of sex than one will find in St. Paul.

Fr. Martin correctly sees how complacent the Church is before the polymorphous manifestation of heterosexual desire, and he detects a double standard. How, if sex is so safe and tame between married couples, can it imperil the souls of gays? Of course, many fine distinctions, many true and important ones, can be drawn between the two cases, but those distinctions lack persuasive force. As long as the Church is so broadly approving of heterosexual desire, it will not be able to speak credibly against homosexual acts.

So I agree with Fr. Martin that an intolerable tension now exists in the Church's attitude toward sex, but I disagree about how that tension should be resolved. More than Allah or Christ, sex is the great god worshipped across the globe. What one of our greatest Catholic commentators [calls](#) the "horny industrial complex" rules the world: selling products, justifying the destruction of families, impelling the transformation of law. Fr. Martin wants the Church to make a more perfect peace with this god. I want it to offer more consistent resistance.

Regrettably, but unavoidably, resisting untruth will require Catholics to be rude. This is why, much as I sympathize with certain points he makes, I reject Fr. Martin's call for civility. Either the Catholic Church is right in what it teaches about human sexuality, or it is wrong. A great many people are convinced that the latter is the case—and thus that any expression of the Church's teaching on homosexual acts will be insensitive and disrespectful. There is no phrasing so artful, no

speaker so refined, that Catholic teaching can be pronounced without offense.

This seems to be Fr. Martin's view. As far as I can tell, he has never found words in which to defend Catholic teaching on homosexuality. This fact is striking. If Fr. Martin, with his winning smile and pleasing voice, his rigorous Jesuit formation and gilded Wharton degree, his friendships with celebrities and appointment at the Vatican, cannot find a polite way to express Christian teaching, then no one can. No Catholic priest is more at home in fashionable society. No modern spiritual master is better equipped to make the faith clubbable. Judging by Fr. Martin's silence, it simply cannot be done. On homosexuality, and not just on homosexuality, Christian teaching inevitably offends.

We should not celebrate this fact. Good manners are less important than truth, but they are a fitting complement to it. In a rightly ordered society, what is true will also be respectable, and delicacy will ornament righteousness rather than cloaking lies and oppression. Fr. Martin's instinct that what is rude cannot be true would be well placed in Eden. Unfortunately, instead of residing in paradise, we groan in bondage of corruption. So long as that is the case, we will have to be [cruel to be kind](#).

By speaking against the faux pas and not the grave sin, by conflating etiquette and ethics, Fr. Martin approves the ways of a world that enslaves us. It is a mistake one does not find in the writings of Judith Martin, who after thousands of columns has more than earned the name Miss Manners. In his even more

extreme insistence on social correctness, James deserves a place beside Judith. Fr. Martin could justly be called Fr. Manners.

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Amoris Laetitia is a ticking ‘atomic bomb’ set to obliterate all Catholic morality: philosopher

August 23, 2017 ([LifeSiteNews](#)) — One of the world’s top Catholic philosophers has called Pope’ Francis’ Exhortation Amoris Laetitia a ticking “theological atomic bomb” that has the capacity to entirely destroy all Catholic moral teaching.

Dr. Josef Seifert, founding rector of the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein, said the only way the theological bomb can be defused is by Pope Francis retracting at least one major error in his 2016 Exhortation.

With philosophical precision, Seifert pinpoints the main problem in Amoris Laetitia (AL) to a passage that he said suggests that God actively wills people, in certain situations, to commit acts that have always been considered objectively evil by the Catholic Church.

He quotes directly from passage 303 of Amoris where Pope Francis speaks about “irregular couples” living in habitual adultery who decide to forgo following the Six Commandment.

“Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel,” wrote Pope Francis in his 2016 Exhortation.

“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,” he added.

Commented Seifert: “In other words, 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.”

But Seifert pointed out that if just one intrinsically immoral act, such as adultery, can be permitted and even willed by God, then there is nothing stopping such a principle being applied to “all acts considered ‘intrinsically wrong.’”

If it is true that God can want an adulterous couple to live in adultery against the Sixth Commandment, he said, then there is nothing to keep the other nine Commandments from falling.

According to such logic, Seifert continued, evils such as murder, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, lying, thievery, perjury, and betrayal can be “justified in some cases and ‘be what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal.’”

“Does not pure logic demand that we draw this consequence from this proposition of Pope Francis?” the philosopher said.

Seifert said that if his above question is answered in the affirmative, then the “purely logical consequence of that one

assertion of Amoris Laetitia seems to destroy the entire moral teaching of the Church.”

The professor’s concern is similar to one of the dubia (questions) raised by the four cardinals to Pope Francis last year asking him to clarify the meaning of his Exhortation.

Question two of five asks the Pope if, with the publication of Amoris, does one still need to regard as valid the teaching of St. John Paul II in Veritatis Splendor that there are “absolute moral norms that prohibit intrinsically evil acts and that are binding without exceptions?”

In his paper, Seifert pleaded with Pope Francis to withdraw and condemn the notion that God sometimes wills people to commit intrinsically evil acts.

“If this is truly what AL affirms, all alarm over AL’s direct affirmations regarding matters of changes of sacramental discipline refer only to the peak of an iceberg, to the weak beginning of an avalanche, or to the first few buildings destroyed by a moral theological atomic bomb that threatens to tear down the whole moral edifice of the Ten Commandments and of Catholic moral teaching,” he said.

Leaving such a notion uncorrected will lead to “nothing less than to a total destruction of the moral teachings of the Catholic Church,” he concluded.

Last week, Cardinal Raymond Burke, one of the four cardinals who signed the dubia almost one year ago, [outlined how the process](#) for issuing a “formal correction” of the Pope would proceed if the Pope continued in his refusal to clarify his teaching.

“It seems to me that the essence of the correction is quite simple,” Burke explained.

“On the one hand, one sets forth the clear teaching of the Church; on the other hand, what is actually being taught by the Roman Pontiff is stated. If there is a contradiction, the Roman Pontiff is called to conform his own teaching in obedience to Christ and the Magisterium of the Church,” he said.

“Pope Francis has chosen not to respond to the five dubia, so it is now necessary simply to state what the Church teaches about marriage, the family, acts that are intrinsically evil, and so forth. These are the points that are not clear in the current teachings of the Roman Pontiff; therefore, this situation must be corrected. The correction would then direct itself principally to those doctrinal points,” he added.

Dr. Josef Seifert paper: Does pure Logic threaten to destroy the entire moral Doctrine of the Catholic Church? Text follows on the next page.

Josef Seifert: Does pure logic threaten to destroy the entire moral doctrine of the Catholic Church?

Does pure logic threaten to destroy the entire moral doctrine of the Catholic Church?

Josef Seifert

August 5, 2017

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Abstract

The question in the title of this paper is addressed to Pope Francis and to all Catholic cardinals, bishops, philosophers and theologians. It deals with a dubium about a purely logical consequence of an affirmation in *Amoris Laetitia*, and ends with a plea to Pope Francis to retract at least one affirmation of AL, if the title question of this little essay has to be answered in the affirmative, and if indeed from this one affirmation in AL alone pure logic, using evident premises, can deduce the destruction of the entire Catholic moral teaching. In a Socratic style, the paper leaves it up to Pope Francis and other readers to answer the title question and to act upon their own answer.

Amoris Laetitia has no doubt created much uncertainty and evoked conflicting interpretations throughout the Catholic World. I do not wish to present this entire controversy here nor

to repeat – or develop further – the position I have defended on this matter in previous articles (See [Josef Seifert, “Amoris Laetitia. Joy, Sadness and Hopes”](#)) I might still do this in a reply to some critical comments I have received from my personal friend Buttiglione, with whom I agree on almost all other philosophical matters, and others.

There is a single affirmation in AL, however, that has nothing to do with a recognition of the rights of subjective conscience, by reference to which Rocco Buttiglione seeks to demonstrate the full harmony between the moral magisterium of Saint John Paul II and Pope Francis, against Robert Spaemann’s and other assertions of a clear break between them. Buttiglione argues that, regarding their contrary teaching on sacramental discipline, Pope John Paul II is correct if one considers only the objective content of human acts, while Pope Francis is right when one accords, after due discernment, to subjective factors and missing conditions of mortal sin (deficient knowledge and weakness of free will) their proper role and recognition.

The assertion of AL I wish to investigate here, however, does not invoke subjective conscience at all, but claims a totally objective divine will for us to commit, in certain situations, acts that are intrinsically wrong, and have always been considered such by the Church. Since God can certainly not have a lack of ethical knowledge, an “erring conscience,” or a weakness of free will, this text does not “defend the rights of human subjectivity,” as Buttiglione claims, but appears to affirm clearly that these

intrinsically disordered and objectively gravely sinful acts, as Buttiglione admits, can be permitted, or can even objectively be commanded, by God. If this is truly what AL affirms, all alarm over AL's direct affirmations, regarding matters of changes of sacramental discipline (admitting, after due discernment, adulterers, active homosexuals, and other couples in similar situations to the sacraments of confession and eucharist, and, logically, also of baptism, confirmation, and matrimony, without their willingness to change their lives and to live in total sexual abstinence, which Pope John Paul II demanded in *Familiaris Consortio* from couples in such "irregular situations"), refer only to the peak of an iceberg, to the weak beginning of an avalanche, or to the first few buildings destroyed by a moral theological atomic bomb that threatens to tear down the whole moral edifice of the 10 commandments and of Catholic Moral Teaching.

In the present paper, however, I will not claim that this is the case. 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. And I must admit that what I read about a commission convened in order to "re-examine" *Humanae Vitae*, an Encyclical that put, like later *Veritatis Splendor*, a definitive end to decades of ethical and moral theological debates, has made this title question of my essay a matter of extreme concern to me.

Let us read the decisive text (AL 303), which is being applied by Pope Francis to the case of adulterous or otherwise “irregular couples” who decide not to follow the demand addressed in the Encyclical *Familiaris Consortio* of Saint Pope John Paul II to such “irregular couples”. Pope John Paul II tells these couples to either separate entirely or, if this is impossible, to abstain entirely from sexual relations. Pope Francis states, however:

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 ([Relatio Finalis 2015, 85](#)) 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 (AL 303).

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. Cf., for example, AL 298, Footnote 329:

“In such situations, many people, knowing and accepting the possibility of living ‘as brothers and sisters’ which the Church offers them, point out that if certain expressions of intimacy are lacking, ‘it often happens that faithfulness is endangered and the good of the children suffers’.”

In *Gaudium et Spes*, 51, from which the last quote is taken, the thought is taken as an invalid objection against the moral demand never to commit adultery or an act of contraception. In AL it is understood in the sense explained above, as a justification, even known to correspond to the objective will of God, to continue to commit objectively speaking grave sins.

In other words, 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. I ask: Can pure Logic fail to ask us under this assumption:

If only one case of an intrinsically immoral act can be permitted and even willed by God, must this not apply to all acts considered ‘intrinsically wrong’? If it is true that God can want an adulterous couple to live in adultery, should then not also the commandment ‘Do not commit adultery!’ be reformulated: ‘If in your situation adultery is not the lesser evil, do not commit it! If it is, continue living it!’?

Must then not also the other 9 commandments, *Humanae Vitae*, *Evangelium Vitae*, and all past and present or future Church documents, dogmas, or councils that teach the existence of intrinsically wrong acts, fall? Is it then not any more intrinsically wrong to use contraceptives and is not *Humanae Vitae* in error that states unambiguously that it can never happen

that contraception in any situation is morally justified, let alone commanded by God?

Must then not, to begin with, the new commission on *Humanae Vitae* Pope Francis instituted, conclude that using contraception can in some situations be good or even obligatory and willed by God? Can then not also abortions, as Mons. Fisichella, then President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, claimed, be justified in some cases and ‘be what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal’?

Must then not from pure logic euthanasia, suicide, or assistance to it, lies, thefts, perjuries, negations or betrayals of Christ, like that of St. Peter, or murder, under some circumstances and after proper “discernment,” be good and praiseworthy because of the complexity of a concrete situation (or because of a lack of ethical knowledge or strength of will)? Can then not God also demand that a Sicilian, who feels obligated to extinguish the innocent family members of a family, whose head has murdered a member of his own family and whose brother would murder four families if he does not kill one, go ahead with his murder, because his act is, under his conditions “what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal”? Does not pure logic demand that we draw this consequence from this proposition of Pope Francis?

However, if the title question of this paper must be answered in the affirmative, as I personally believe to be the case, the purely logical consequence of that one assertion of *Amoris Laetitia* seems to destroy the entire moral teaching of the Church. Should it not, therefore, be withdrawn and condemned by Pope Francis himself, who no doubt abhors such a consequence, which, if the title question needs to be answered affirmatively, iron and cool logic cannot fail to draw from the cited assertion of Pope Francis?

Thus I wish to plead with our supreme spiritual Father on Earth, the “sweet Christ on earth,” as Saint Catherine of Siena called one of the Popes, under whose reign she lived, while she criticized him fiercely (if Pope Francis agrees with this logical conclusion, and answers the title question of this essay in the affirmative) to please retract the mentioned affirmation. If its logical consequences lead with iron stringency to nothing less than to a total destruction of the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, should the “sweet Christ on Earth” not retract an affirmation of his own? If the mentioned thesis leads with cogent logical consequence to the rejection of there being any acts that must be considered intrinsically morally wrong, under any circumstances and in all situations, and if this assertion will tear down, after *Familiaris Consortio* and *Veritatis Splendor*, likewise *Humanae Vitae* and many other solemn Church teachings, should it not be revoked? Are there not evidently such acts that are always intrinsically wrong, as there are other acts, which are always intrinsically good, justified, or willed by God? (See John

Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*. See also Josef Seifert, “The Splendor of Truth and Intrinsically Immoral Acts: A Philosophical Defense of the Rejection of Proportionalism and Consequentialism in ‘Veritatis Splendor’.” In: *Studia Philosophiae Christianae UKSW* 51 (2015) 2, 27-67. “The Splendor of Truth and Intrinsically Immoral Acts II: A Philosophical Defense of the Rejection of Proportionalism and Consequentialism in ‘Veritatis Splendor’.” In: *Studia Philosophiae Christianae UKSW* 51 (2015) 3, 7-37.) And should not every Cardinal and Bishop, every priest, monk or consecrated Virgin, and every layperson in the Church, take a most vivid interest in this and subscribe this passionate plea of a humble layperson, a simple Professor of Philosophy and, among other subjects, of logic?

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