



The Cost of Passive-Aggressive Anger from the Vatican and the Hierarchy

by Richard Fitzgibbons, M.D.

Cardinal Beaufort Interrogating Joan of Arc in Prison by Paul Delaroche

Catholic laity, priests, and members of the hierarchy worldwide are expressing grave concerns about Vatican-related attempts to change 2,000 years of Church doctrine, particularly in regard to marriage, human sexuality, sin, and the priesthood.

One strategy that is being used in this effort, as seen from a psychological perspective, is leveling angry and insulting accusations against those who remain loyal, with the intent to undermine their confidence and to control those who do not go along with radical changes in Doctrine and practice. This hostility works to turn other bishops, priests, and laity against the faithful who adhere to doctrinal orthodoxy.

A strategy in use by the so-called ‘progressives’ is the use of passive-aggressive anger in a covert and stealthy manner of undermining the Faith by remaining silent in the face of pastoral behaviors that are completely against Church Doctrine. Both of these strategies have increased markedly since the release of the Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Amoris Laetitia*.

Direct Anger

In regard to the first strategy, over the past several months three Vatican-approved articles have been written leveling strongly critical, angry, and highly unusual accusations against Americans and Evangelicals, some by name. Among these articles is one by Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa in *La Civiltà Cattolica*¹; another, which can only be described as a diatribe against bishops and Priests, by Giulio Cirignano is in the weekend edition of *L'Osservatore*

*Romano*²; and a third, by papal biographer Austen Ivereigh, in *Crux* magazine against seven Catholic editors and writers who were identified as being mentally ill for raising concerns about *Amoris Laetitia*.³

Reacting to the strong criticism of his article, Ivereigh apologized for his personal attacks.⁴ The editor of *Crux*, John L. Allen, Jr., has also apologized and stated that he should not have allowed such personal criticism to be published. Unfortunately, no such apologies have been offered for the other two essays, by either the authors or the editors.

The direct expression of anger in these articles has been widely criticized and evaluated as basically being false accusations. Recommendations have been offered to prevent further Vatican-approved accusations.⁵

The fourth recent Vatican-related false accusation was made against the critics of *Amoris Laetitia* by Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández who is reported to have drafted the document. He has falsely accused the critics of presenting a “death trap.” He claimed that critics who quote from Scripture to forbid opening the door to Holy Communion in such cases (of fornication in relationships) are presenting a “death trap” through forcing others to “assume a particular logic.”⁶

Passive-Aggressive Anger

Some of the anger that is being expressed against loyal Catholics and constant Catholic doctrine from people in the Vatican is identified in the mental health field as passive-aggressive anger.

As opposed to the direct expression of anger, attempts are made to give vent to this strong anger in a masked and stealthy manner with hope that it will be difficult to identify clearly and address. This disguised anger can undermine the faith and support schism in a covert manner.⁷

We have described this masked anger and the severe damage it causes to marriage in our *American Psychological Association* book on uncovering and treating excessive anger in psychiatric disorders with forgiveness therapy.⁸ *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* describes the passive-aggressive personality disorder as a pervasive pattern of negativistic attitudes and passive resistance to demands for adequate performance in social and occupational situations.

In Catholic families this anger often manifests itself as a strong resistance to acting in a responsible and loyal manner and also by avoiding Church teaching on sexual

morality and the sacraments.

A number of Catholic mental health professionals and laity are greatly concerned about what appears to be an epidemic of passive-aggressive anger in the Church. This covert anger appears to be directed particularly against the sacraments of Marriage, Holy Orders, the Eucharist, Confession, and the Church's 2,000-year teaching on sexual morality.

Passive-Aggressive Strategy

Those who exhibit anger in this manner attempt to give the appearance of being loving, caring, and compassionate while at the same time enjoying the venting of anger in a hidden manner. Such anger is not infrequently misdirected against the faith. For example, a passive-aggressive spouse, priest, or bishop might make subtle disparaging comments about needing to protect children or laity from certain Church teachings that are portrayed as rigid or lacking in compassion, love, and mercy. These would include particularly the Church's teaching on marriage, sexuality, cohabitation, and divorce.

In this way, the priest or bishop who employs passive-aggressive anger attempts to place others on the defensive by the false claim that the Church's traditional teaching opposes mercy and Christian love. In doing so, a strong moral claim is made against those loyal to such teaching, essentially demonizing them. The goal of such covert passive-aggressive anger is to undermine the trust in those laity, priests, and bishops who are loyal.

History of Passive-Aggressive Anger

Passive-aggressive anger has been expressed intensely in the Church over the past forty-nine years beginning with the rebellion against *Humanae Vitae* and, subsequently, against loyal bishops and priests as described by Cardinal James Francis Stafford.⁹ Bishops and priests have refused to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations as spiritual fathers to teach the truths of the faith particularly in regard to sexual morality and the sacraments. Instead, they supported situational ethics in Catholic seminaries, universities, and secondary schools, potentially making an unformed conscience more important than the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Church.

In our professional work with priests we have seen this passive-aggressive anger increase significantly over the past several years against priests whose ministry is influenced by the teaching of Saint John Paul II on sexual morality, marriage, divorce, and the Eucharist. Dioceses and religious communities have labeled such loyal priests as being inflexible, "rigid," and hostile and have made

efforts to limit their ministry or even remove them from ministry, based primarily upon false accusations that are usually about their mental health.

Recent Marked Increase in Passive Anger

In addition, reports are emerging that priests in different parts of the world, who refuse to give Communion to remarried couples living in a state of adultery or same sex couples, are being threatened and punished for supporting 2,000 years of Church teaching on the Eucharist and sexual morality rather than supporting the Pope's footnote in *Amoris Laetitia*.¹⁰

Cardinal Robert Sarah gave an address this year describing how members of the hierarchy are expressing anger in a passive manner against their spouse, the Church, by refusing to affirm the truths of the faith:

Many refuse to face up to the Church's work of self-destruction through the deliberate demolition of her doctrinal, liturgical, moral, and pastoral foundations. While more and more voices of high-ranking prelates stubbornly affirm

obvious doctrinal, moral, and liturgical errors that have been condemned a hundred times and work to demolish the little faith remaining in the people of God, while the bark of the Church furrows the stormy sea of this decadent world and the waves crash down on the ship so that it is already filling with

water, a growing number of Church leaders and faithful shout: "*Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise!*" ("Everything is just fine, Milady").¹¹

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Father Arturo Sosa Abascal, S.J., the new head of the Jesuit order, has recently challenged Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage stating in an interview that the words of Jesus against divorce are "relative" and must be "discerned" according to the "conscience" of each.¹² At the same time he put Sacred Scripture in doubt, saying that we "don't know what Jesus really said... there were no recording instruments at that time." Also, Father Thomas Reese, S.J., who was recently given a Vatican appointment, has written¹³ a rejection of Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. He also has written against the teaching of the Church on homosexuality.

Shockingly, German Cardinal Reinhard Marx has stated that Germany's recent legalization of homosexual "marriage" is of no major concern for the Catholic Church in that country. Cardinal Raymond Burke corrected Cardinal Marx: "But, in a diabolical way, the confusion and error which has led human culture in the way of death and destruction

has also entered into the Church, so that she draws near to the culture without seeming to know her own identity and mission, without seeming to have the clarity and the courage to announce the Gospel of Life and Divine Love to the radically secularized culture.”¹⁴

There is currently an intense passive-aggressive expression of anger against doctrine and marriage that is directed towards the influence of Saint John Paul’s II’s teaching, including *Familiaris Consortio*, the Magna Carta for Catholic marriages and families, and *Veritatis Splendor*.¹⁵ It is also directed toward the sainted Pope’s correcting and bringing to an end initiatives in the Church that supported the sexual revolution in the culture.¹⁶

The interim report of the first Synod on the Family in 2015 was a clear rejection of John Paul’s teaching regarding same-sex and cohabiting unions. This was a clear attempt to use passive anger to undermine the legacy of Saint John Paul II and to remove his influence in the Church. This may explain the appointment of Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia as the director of the John Paul II Institutes for Studies on Marriage and Family worldwide.¹⁷

Passive anger is also being directed at the Church’s teaching on the priesthood. In a recently published book, Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, the president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, responsible for the official interpretation of the Code of Canon Law, wrote: “When someone is ordained in the Anglican Church and becomes a parish priest in a community, we cannot say that nothing has happened, that everything is ‘invalid.’”¹⁸ His belief that, “We have had, and we still have a very rigid understanding of validity and invalidity: this is valid, and that is not valid. One should be able to say: ‘this is valid in a certain context and that is valid in another context.’” These statements of Cardinal Coccopalmerio have been strongly criticized.¹⁹

Cardinal Robert Sarah in a Wall Street Journal article, 9/1/2017, criticized American Jesuit Father James Martin’s book, *Building a Bridge*, in which Father Martin repeats the common criticism that Catholics have been harshly critical of homosexuality while neglecting the importance of sexual integrity among all of its followers. Cardinal Sarah wrote:

For the unmarried—no matter their attractions—faithful chastity requires abstention from sex. This might seem a high standard, especially today. Yet it would be contrary to the wisdom and goodness of Christ to require something that cannot be achieved. Jesus calls us to this virtue because He has made

our hearts for purity, just as He has made our minds for truth. With God’s grace and our perseverance, chastity is not only possible, but it will also become the source for true freedom.²⁰

Up to today, neither the prelates publicly affirming doctrinal errors (including Cardinals Marx and Coccopalmerio) nor the two Jesuits challenging the indissolubility of marriage or the Church’s teaching on homosexuality have been corrected by the Holy Father. With all due respect, the Holy Father’s silence can only be viewed from a psychological perspective as giving support to rebellion against 2,000 years of Church teaching, using a passive manner.

Additionally, the Holy Father’s refusal to respond to the dubia and clarify his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, is being used to undermine the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist and Marriage.²¹ Even more lamentably, according to a Maltese news outlet, Pope Francis has thanked the bishops of Malta²² for their guidelines that allow people living in objectively sinful situations to receive Communion if they feel “at peace with God.”

In a recent article on *Amoris Laetitia*, Father Regis Scanlon, O.F.M.Cap., wrote

Many good Catholic cardinals and bishops would like to interpret *Amoris Laetitia* as if it *did not open the door* for the divorced and remarried to receive Communion.

They would like Catholics to

interpret *Amoris Laetitia* in an orthodox manner and to ignore any suggestion in the document that it may be permissible for divorced and invalidly remarried couples to receive Communion while continuing their sexual relationship. But even though Church leaders hope the orthodox interpretation will be emphasized, it is not what is being stealthily insinuated in this document.²³

Psychological threats to Catholic marriages and families have also been identified in *Amoris Laetitia*.²⁴

A prominent Dominican canon lawyer, Father Aidan Nichols, said that *Amoris Laetitia* has led to an “extremely grave” situation²⁵ that may need a canonical procedure “for calling to order a pope who teaches error.” He stated that the interpretation of the document, such as the one given by Archbishop Fernández, contradicts the perennial teaching of the Church, and that the exhortation effectively argues for “tolerated concubinage.”

A prominent Catholic philosopher, Josef Seifert, has claimed that there is a point in the text of *Amoris laetitia* that is a kind of “moral theological atomic bomb” that



threatens, in its logical consequences, to tear down the whole moral edifice of the Ten Commandments and of Catholic Moral Teaching.²⁶

E. Christian Brugger has written that the Catholic Church is now in *de facto* schism, enabled to a growing extent by the Holy Father's silence, his refusal to teach the Church's truth on sexual morality, and his tacit support of those who rebel. Brugger has offered a number of important recommendations for lay Catholics:

Knowing that the episcopate is divided on *de fide* doctrines of morality, Pope Francis needs to lead his brother bishops to face frankly this crisis in the Church and to resolve firmly to overcome it... Meanwhile, lay Catholics should not allow distress over the present situation to shake faith in Jesus' promise to preserve the Church from damnable error and to provide a trustworthy barque for the salvation of souls.²⁷

Although it is the responsibility of theologians and philosophers loyal to the Church to address the substance of doctrinal and intellectual problems, the Catholic laity who are mental health professionals have a responsibility to the Church to uncover and address the possible psychological conflicts that are now seriously threatening the

well-being of Catholic marriages, children, families, and the Church. The professional recommendation offered is the same offered to passive-aggressive spouses, which is that the failure to teach the truth and to correct is a manifestation of divisiveness and should end through growth in virtues and in grace.

Hopefully, the Holy Father will confirm more clearly his brothers (and the laity) in the faith (cf. Lk. 22: 32).

In spite of these unprecedented stormy waters, we can draw strength, hope, and comfort from Pope Benedict's words in 2010:

May the seven years which separate us from the centenary of the apparitions (of Fatima) hasten the fulfillment of the triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity.²⁸ ✠



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Notes

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