

December 7, 2015, Archbishop Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for New Evangelization, at a Vatican press briefing affirmed that some criticisms of Pope Francis might result in “automatic excommunication”. In reference to Canon 1370, which imposes “automatic excommunication” for physical “violence” against the Roman Pontiff, Archbishop Fisichella said:

*“I would say that we need to understand well ‘physical violence,’ because sometimes words, too, are rocks and stones, and therefore I believe some of these sins, too, are far more widespread than we might think.”*

Canon 1370 §1, of the Code of Canon Law that all Catholics are obliged to uphold states, *“A person who uses physical force against the Roman Pontiff incurs a **latae sententiae excommunication** reserved to the Apostolic See; if he is a cleric, another penalty, not excluding dismissal from the clerical state, can be added according to the gravity of the delict.”*

If Bishop R. Fisichella affirms that one may indeed risk “automatic excommunication” (*latae sententiae*) by wrongly criticizing the Roman Pontiff, it is because such an act of sinful in the eyes of God and, therefore, of the Church. “*Latae sententiae*” is a Latin phrase that signifies that a “*sentence has been passed* of excommunication” ipso facto or automatically, by force of the law itself. The word “automatic” is pivotal in this sentence of excommunication, as it indicates that no written document is required to impose excommunication. For said excommunication takes effect automatically, i.e., at the precise moment the individual makes a false public criticism against the Roman Pontiff that is grave in nature and that results in the public moral and spiritual harm to the members of the Body of Christ. As for examples of a grave criticism against the Roman Pontiff that may result in automatic excommunication, consider the accusation that the Roman Pontiff is a false pontiff whose teachings are to be ignored; the Roman Pontiff is a validly elected Pope but he is leading the Church into heresy; the promotion of public prayers to end this Pope’s pontificate; etc. The reason for this automatic excommunication is predicated upon the nature of these and other false public criticisms that constitute a grave sinful action.

In light said verbal attacks of certain so-called Catholics on Pope Francis, one is reminded of the moral obligation every Catholic has of properly forming one’s conscience (CCC, 1783-1785, 1791). When the failure to form one’s conscience leads to such consequences as detraction from the lawful reputation of the Roman Pontiff, it constitutes a sinful action, for it is a libelous transgression of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, of arts. 2477-2479 of the Catholic Catechism, of arts. 128 and 220 of the Code of Canon Law and it refutes the holy counsel of God to St. Catherine of Siena.

Let us review articles 2477-2479 of **The Catholic Catechism** that all Catholics are obliged to uphold:

*“Respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury.<sup>278</sup> He becomes guilty:*

- of rash judgment who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor;*
- of detraction who, without objectively valid reason, discloses another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them;<sup>279</sup>*
- of calumny who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them” (art. 2477).*

*“To avoid rash judgment, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor's thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way:*

*Every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another's statement than to condemn it. But if he cannot do so, let him ask how the other understands it. And if the latter understands it badly, let the former correct him with love. If that does not suffice, let the Christian try all suitable ways to bring the other to a correct interpretation so that he may be saved.<sup>280</sup>*

*Detraction and calumny destroy the reputation and honor of one's neighbor. Honor is the social witness given to human dignity, and everyone enjoys a natural right to the honor of his name and reputation and to respect. Thus, detraction and calumny offend against the virtues of justice and charity” (arts. 2478-2479).*

Let us now review articles 128 and 220 of **The Code of Canon Law** that all Catholics are obliged to uphold:

*“No one is permitted to harm illegitimately the good reputation which a person possesses nor to injure the right of any person to protect his or her own privacy” (art. 220).*

*“Whoever illegitimately inflicts damage upon someone by a juridic act or by any other act placed with malice or negligence is obliged to repair the damage inflicted” (art. 128).*

Let us now review the holy counsel of God to **St. Catherine of Siena**:

*“[It] is My intention that Priests be held in due reverence, not for what they are in themselves, but for My sake, because of the authority I have given them. Therefore the virtuous*

*must not lessen their reverence, even should these Priests fall short in virtue. And, as far as the virtues of my Priests are concerned, I have described them for you by setting them before you as stewards of... My Son's Body and Blood and of the other Sacraments. This dignity belongs to all who are appointed as such stewards, to the bad as well as to the good... [Because] of their virtue and because of their sacramental dignity you ought to love them. And you ought to hate the sins of those who live evil lives. But you may not for all that set ourselves up as their judges; this is not My Will because they are My Christs, and you ought to love and reverence the authority I have given them.*

*You know well enough that if someone filthy or poorly dressed were to offer you a great treasure that would give you life, you would not disdain the bearer for love of the treasure, and the lord who had sent it, even though the bearer was ragged and filthy... You ought to despise and hate the Priests' sins and try to dress them in the clothes of charity and holy prayer and wash away their filth with your tears. Indeed, I have appointed them and given them to you to be angels on earth and suns, as I have told you. When they are less than that you ought to pray for them. But you are not to judge them. Leave the judging to Me, and I, because of your prayers and my own desire, will be merciful to them" (Catherine of Siena; *The Dialogue*, translated by Suzanne Noffke, O.P., New York: Paulist Press, 1980, pp. 229-231).*

Now, is "judging" the same as "criticizing"? The Random House American College Dictionary defines the word "criticize" as, "1. To make judgments as to merits and faults. 2. To find fault."

Clearly, the Lord wants prayers, not judgment for his priests, including the Roman Pontiff. How sad that some are far more ready to judge (criticize) the Roman Pontiff than they are to pray for him. One can only imagine how much better off the Church would be if all the energy given to criticizing the Pope were devoted to prayer and penance on his behalf; and how much better off those who prayed and did penance would be!

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