

## **En anglais... Exclusive interview : Prof Josef Seifert, of the Pontifical Academy for Life, speaks about the Recife affair**

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**Categories :** [Divers Jeanne smits](#)

**Date :** 2 juin 2009

The following interview with Pr Josef Seifert, of the Pontifical academy for life, by Jeanne Smits, was published in in French in [Présent](#) dated May 26th 2009. It followed the remarks published by Pr Seifert following Mgr Fisichella's note in the *Osservatore Romano*.

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– *Why did you choose to write to Mgr Fischella ?*

– It was not really a letter to Mgr Fisichella, even if several internet sites which published my remarks presented it as such. We – that is, several members of the Academy – wrote privately to our president. The text to which you refer was not a letter but a series of remarks : I was asked to express my opinion because, worldwide, there was confusion about whether there was a change to the teaching of the Church on abortion.

– *But you found these observations and remarks necessary and you do maintain them.*

– Yes, I found them necessary because I think one can see how all through the pro-abortion circles, in countless articles, Mrs Frances Kissling, who called Fisichella's article "an amazing shift in the Vatican's strategy of no dissent from its position that direct abortion is never permitted", and many others interpreted it as a complete change in the teaching of the Church which they welcome, by believing that now so-called "therapeutic abortion" is okay in the eyes of the Church. In my opinion this is not a wrong construal of the article of Mgr Fisichella (even though he indicates at the beginning of his article that the Church's doctrine on abortion does not change). I certainly hope that Mgr Fisichella does not really maintain this position but his article certainly creates this impression both with the opponents and the adherents to abortion and therefore I thought it was very urgently necessary to speak on this, also in public. And I hope that the Church, with authority, will speak out.

– *You write that several people of the Pontifical Academy for Life have been speaking about this privately. Is the discussion going on, as far as you know?*

– I feel it is not up to me to speak about the internal operations in the PAV, or of the members of the Academy, but I can say a number of members hoped that Mgr Fisichella would express himself, and that some of them wrote to him jointly, and others personally. Despite this there has been no public correction or change to this opinion he published. That much I can say, for the rest I wouldn't like to give information to the press about the names or numbers of those who reacted.

– *This whole affair was about communication. Was Mgr Cardoso Sobrinho right to speak about excommunication ? I think there are two points here : the point that in Western circles, it was assumed that the little girl was on the point of dying, which was not true. But if she had been, do you think it would be possible to say that excommunication would not intervene because of the fear of death on the part of the mother of the little girl?*

– First of all, the archbishop of Recife made corrections, which I added to the text of my observations published on internet. He did not excommunicate this girl, the nine year-old who had an abortion. And he did not actually excommunicate the responsible people: he told them that they were excommunicated automatically. Mgr Fisichella mentions as much at the beginning of his article. It was not a direct excommunication of the people concerned but a public declaration of the archbishop, that all those involved in the abortion were excommunicated *latae sententiae*. This is what the *Codex Juris canonici* says, and I think also *Evangelium Vitae*. It was not a new excommunication or the excommunication of a nine year-old girl.

This girl was not actually in danger of dying, the abortion was not a life-saving act as it appeared in the article. It was simply an abortion on a nine year-old girl, who was abused sexually by her stepfather. It was very sad, no doubt, and from that point of view Mgr Fisichella was right to say that it was an extremely tragic case; but the archbishop of Recife was completely aware of that. Moreover, in point of fact he was not communicating poorly, but he was being a pastor and he was trying to do everything that could be imagined to show love and charity to this girl and also to her mother and father. Mgr Fisichella's article creates the false impression that Mgr Cardoso Sobrinho neglected his pastoral duties in this case and instead of showing charity had only cruelly waved an excommunication flag against a nine year old.

If the little girl really had been in danger of dying those responsible persons who collaborated with it, would still incur excommunication; abortion, in the eyes of the Church, even to save some life, is not permitted. That would still fall under this sanction of excommunication. But apart from that, it wasn't the case.

– *No, it was not the case. I think it's more a question of sensitivity of Western people who are not Catholic anymore, who do not understand what excommunication means. Would you agree with that?*

– Yes, no doubt. I think there was a sort of hysteria about this excommunication, but the archbishop José Cardoso Sobrinho declared his conviction that in this particular situation, with the public discussion accompanying it, it seemed pastorally and out of charity necessary to state publicly that those who performed or collaborated in the abortions incurred excommunication. As we can see from what happened after the article of Mgr Fisichella, many people who are Catholics or who are seen as Catholics, seem to be claiming therapeutic abortions can be carried out; Mrs. Kissling even was President of an organization that is a contradiction in terms: "Catholics for choice" (pro freedom for abortion). In Canada, people, including an archbishop, came out quite openly on this, drawing the same conclusion from the Fisichella article. There was confusion and I think the archbishop Cardoso Sobrinho was correct to say that if one does not speak about that at all, the impression remains that it is not a heinous crime to kill unborn

innocent children, because this idea has disappeared so widely from society. There are so many countries in which abortion is legal that I think he made a good point.

In my opinion that is the reason why the reaction to the archbishop's declarations was nearly hysterical, as if he had done nothing to take care pastorally of the girl, and of the babies, as if he had spoken coldly and without further ado excommunicated all those involucrated in the abortion. I think the declaration of the diocese puts this in a very good perspective that is quite contrary to the wrong impression drawn from the Fisichella article.

*– You used the word “charity”, which is very interesting. You said the archbishop of Recife had the charity to say the truth about this. I'd like you to go a bit further on this point: actually you're saying the Church is charitable when it shows people that something is very wrong.*

– If it is the truth that to kill the unborn is a great crime, if it is a serious thing and puts in peril the soul of all those who do abortions or who participate in abortion, then I think it is an act of charity to make people aware of this fact, and it is a lack of charity to be silent about the real nature of this crime. But the archbishop, together with a pastor, showed his charity not only in mentioning the excommunication but also in many, many efforts to save the lives of the children, and the health and spiritual well-being of the girl, in offering pastoral services to her and to the mother. His charity was not restricted to his declarations on the excommunication of the mother or the other persons involved.

But I do indeed think that he was *also* charitable in telling them that in the eyes of the Church, who teaches the truth opportune-importune, there are actions which separate those who commit them from the community of the Church and which also constitute enormously great dangers for their souls. Therefore I think it is certainly not charitable not to warn people of such a danger and to lull them in a feeling that they have done well or have just been saving a young girl's life. This applies to any dangers. Telling someone that if he comes close to some danger he will die is an act of charity, not to tell him is a lack of charity: why should it not be charity to tell someone that through what he does he might lose his eternal life? Christ, who is God and hence Love (Charity) Itself, warns us a tremendous number of times of the danger of hell. I think the words of archbishop Sobrinho must be seen in that light.

Now of course in a society in which people have reached a more or less general consensus that there is no danger of peril to any soul, that there is no sin, or at least no mortal or grave sin, it must appear extremely old-fashioned, rude, and uncharitable to say such a thing, which it would be if sin and the threat of damnation are fairy-tales. But if these exist, there exists a “charitable excommunication” and to see any form of excommunication, even if preceded by ardent charity and spiritual pastoral care, as uncharitable would be a profound misconception.

*– Are you afraid, in the light of what is happening, that the doctrine of the Church is really changing, or rather that it is not being proclaimed as it should be ?*

– I am not afraid that the Church's teaching on the absolute and unconditional wrongness of abortion and killing human embryos in any other form (by abortion pills, embryonic stem cell research, etc.) is changing, because as a Catholic I believe that the Church is guided by the

Holy Spirit who will prevent that it ever declares false things on very important issues of morality or doctrine. Purely humanly speaking I would be extremely afraid because of this long silence from the Vatican on such an important and urgent issue, a silence which I find quite wrong, wherefore I hope it will end soon. But Gamaliel in the Acts of the Apostles gives an argument for the truth of the Church and the divine foundation of the Church, which I consider extremely strong and would like to call the “rascal proof of the Catholic Church”, which appears in cynical undertones also in one of Bocaccio’s stories in the *Decamerone*: Gamaliel says the Jews should not abuse or kill the apostles because if their work is purely human it will disappear in a generation, while if it is divine they would be fighting God in killing the apostles.

And indeed the teaching of the Church has not changed for two thousand years in spite of some horrible Popes, and with our present Pope and Pope John Paul II we have been blessed with wonderful Popes! In the past, some Popes were really terrible, but in spite of them and many corrupt and heretical bishops and cardinals during two thousand years of history and sometimes of exorbitant corruption, worldliness and heretical views in the Vatican, Church doctrine has not changed on any single essential point, and that is, I think, a miracle. Even the greatest philosophers, such as Plato, had their noblest cognitions denied in their own school within decades. How much more would a mere man-guided religion that teaches such immense mysteries fall apart and splinter into thousands of sects without the divine gift of infallibility and guidance through God? I believe in that miracle of the Catholic Church of which the Jew Gamaliel spoke, and I therefore – and solely of it being God’s work - do not think the Church will ever change its doctrine.

But it’s another thing for a bishop, who can easily err, or even for a Congregation for the Faith or a Pope, to declare sufficiently strongly a teaching of the Church. Pope John Paul II, the Great, did so magnificently in *Evangelium Vitae* regarding human life and abortion, and I hope that this will happen again, especially after this confusing article which makes a quick and unambiguous and public reiteration of this doctrine necessary. But of course there is no guarantee that at all times all bishops, or responsible cardinals, or even the Pope himself (let alone the *Osservatore Romano*, who lately not only published the Fisichella article in several languages after its errors about archbishop Sobrinho were already clearly known, but a series of other scandalous articles on life issues, for example some of at least implicitly critiquing of the 80 US bishops, who decried Notre Dame’s decision to give Obama, the most pro-abortion US President of all times, an honorary doctorate of law), will proclaim the teachings of the Church strongly enough. Saint Catherine of Sienna condemned this great evil of uncharitable silence in the Church of her time. My fear is that we ourselves, and the authorities of the Church, never proclaim the truth and a true Church teaching strongly enough, but I do think very strongly that one must do everything to express the desire and the hope that it will be done, and to pray for that intention.

– *I’d like to put to you the point made by a French catholic journalist who was very angry about the gesture of Mons. Cardoso: he said all the people who were applauding the archbishop are part of a “vitalist” heresy which has an excessive respect for human biological life. How do you react to this sort of reasoning ?*

– I think a “vitalist heresy” in the sense of overestimating or idolizing the value of earthly human

life is an extremely low danger in the Church today. I think the real danger is rather the exact opposite: what Pope John Paul called the “culture of death” heresy. I don’t know exactly what this journalist means but if it is that he calls the insistence on the sublime dignity and morally binding character of the dignity of every human life from conception to death a heresy, that is a complete abuse of the term “heresy”. Especially given the fact that the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* declares – dogmatically, because the Pope invokes the authority of Peter and his successors – very clearly, that human life from conception to death deserves full respect, with no exception, and that any direct killing of an innocent life is clearly a crime. So from that respect, I think any statement that relativizes this, like saying therapeutic abortion is acceptable, or that it is very unclear whether it is permitted or not, is actually a “culture of death” heresy in the light of that dogmatic declaration of *Evangelium vitae*.

You could of course speak of vitalist heresy in the case of environmentalists who argue that every form of life, even bacterial life, should not be killed. If we are speaking about an absolute right for every living organism, animals or plants, and we must all be vegetarians or only eat fruits, that could indeed be called a “vitalist heresy” – like making an uproar, with Brigitte Bardot, when sheep are slaughtered in Morocco for the muslims greatest religious feast. But I think it would be a very shocking misuse of the word to call the full and unconditional respect for each human being’s life “heresy”. That no innocent human life must ever be taken is not only a natural ethical point of view or an objective ethical insight that Socrates could state even apart from the context of Revelation (when he refuses to kill the innocent Leon, even at the risk of his own life, being asked by the government to do so), but it is the clearly declared Church teaching, particularly in *Evangelium vitae*.