

The Palmarian Papacy of Gregory XVIII

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Gregory XVIII (2011-2016) was the third of the popes of the Palmarian Catholic Church. The first of them was Gregory XVII (Clemente Domínguez Gómez), who claimed that Christ elected him after the death of Paul VI in 1978. At that moment, he asserted that the Holy See was moved from Rome to Palmar de Troya, due to Rome's had apostasy. The Roman era of the church had come to an end and the Palmarian had begun. It would exist until the second coming of Christ.

The papal election and the foundation of a new church was the final chapter in a history that had begun ten years before with a Marian apparition to four girls outside the small Andalusian town of Palmar de Troya. When the girls were out of picture, many other people claimed to receive visions and locutions at the site. One of them was Clemente Domínguez, who, beginning in 1969, went there in company with his friend, Manuel Alonso Corral. Within a couple of years, the two managed to take control of the site and the cult, which was not approved of by the local church hierarchy. In 1970, and then again in 1972, the archbishop of Seville explicitly denounced it, looking upon it as a sign of mass hysteria, not having anything to do with Roman Catholic faith. Despite this (or perhaps therefore), the site and the apparitions connected to it, remained popular.

In the first half of the 1970s, Clemente, Manuel and the group around them managed to spread the Palmarian messages on a national and international level. They convinced people in traditionalist circles that Clemente was the most important seer at Palmar de Troya, and that Palmar Troya was the last and foremost apparition site, following in the steps of apocalyptically centered apparitions at La Salette, Fatima, Heroldsbach and Garabandal. With generous donations from

people both in Spain and abroad, they could purchase the apparition site and make long journeys through Europe and the Americas.

In 1975-1976, the group took an important step towards greater institutionalization, when the leaders were ordained priests and bishops by Vietnamese archbishop Pierre Martin Ngo Dinh Thuc. Just before the first ordinations, they founded a new religious order, the Carmelites of the Holy Face, with friars, nuns and tertiaries. In their view it replaced all other religious orders. In less than two years, between 1976 and 1978, 90 males were consecrated Palmarian bishops. The high degree of institutionalization and the abundant economic resources made the Palmarian movement a special case in the traditionalist world.

Gregory XVII claimed that Christ had crowned him pope of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Palmarian Church, which from 1978 onwards was the only true church in the end times. He would rule the church until his death in 2005, when he was succeeded by his old brother-in-arms Manuel Alonso, who took Peter II as his papal name. After a six-year papacy, Peter II died in 2011. Then, Ginés Jesús Hernández Martínez, in the order called Father Sergio María succeeded him, taking the name Gregory XVIII. His papacy ended on 22 April 2016, when he left the church. In Spanish media, he openly admitted that he now lived together with a woman, whom he would marry. He also stated that he had recently realized that the Palmarian church was a scam, and therefore could not be a part of it anymore.

The purpose of this article is to study the papacy of Gregory XVIII, using official church documents, testimonies of the ex-pope during April and May 2016, and testimonies of ex-Palmarians, who experienced his five-year pontificate.

The Way to the Papacy

Ginés Jesús Hernández Martínez, the future Palmarian pope Gregory XVIII was born in 1959 in Mula in the Spanish province of Murcia. The available sources to his early life are few. In his own texts, he asserts that he from the early 1970s frequented the apparition site at Palmar de Troya. He became a believer in the messages to Clemente Domínguez, joined the movement, but later left. For a brief

period, in the mid-1970s he attended a Roman Catholic seminary in Toledo. According to many earlier sources, he was for some time a military officer, but after leaving the papacy, he stated that he worked as an electrician, but that he for some time was a soldier. Hernández Martínez later returned to the Palmarian church, where he was consecrated a bishop in 1984. When entering the Carmelites of the Holy Face, he was given the name Sergio María (15 aug 11).

With time, Father Sergio María assumed increasingly important positions in the Palmarian hierarchy, and by the end of the 1990s he was at the very pinnacle. Father Elias María (Carmelo Pacheco Sánchez) died in a car accident in 1997. He was the third part of the original Palmarian triad, led by Pope Gregory XVII (Clemente Domínguez Gómez) and Father Isidoro María (Manuel Alonso Corral). At the death of Elias María, Sergio María replaced him as Vice-secretary of State and thus became “number three” in the Palmarian hierarchy. At the death of Gregory XVII. Sergio María then became the Secretary of State and the Vice General of the Order. He was now “number two” in rank after pope Peter II.

As the cardinalate had been abolished in the Palmarian church in the mid-1990s, according to church law the reigning pope should elect his successor. Having been severely ill for a long time, Peter II appointed Father Sergio María as his successor through a decree signed on 3 March 2011. According to the official Palmarian version, Peter II had made his intention clear to the Palmarian bishops already by 6 July 2010.

During the papacy of Peter II, several ex-members, both clergy and laypeople, told me that they feared that the conditions would deteriorate even more if Sergio María came to power, which seemed very probable. The detailed control of members had become harder during the papacy of Peter II. Still, many former members, whom I had contact with at the time, were afraid that their family members who remained Palmarians would have to live an even more secluded life if Sergio María became the pope. They thought that he was a harsh and unpredictable. In short, these informants, without exception, described Sergio María as a hardliner and an irate and highly erratic character.

The Beginning of Gregory's Papacy

Peter II died on 15 July 2011. As he had the right of succession, the papal transition went fast, and Bishop Sergio María was crowned on 17 July as pope Gregory XVIII. On that occasion, he canonized his predecessor, who became known as St. Peter the Great. As pope he could freely chose his closest co-workers, and appointed Father Eliseo María as his Secretary of State. He is a Swiss who has been a Palmarian bishop since the mid-1980s and his civil name is Josef Markus Odermatt.

Shortly after the papal coronation, Gregory XVIII declared 2012 (or year 7211 of Creation, according to Palmarian doctrine) a Holy Year and convened the Third Palmarian Council, which should begin in January 2012. In the official presentation of the Palmarian Church and its popes that was printed during the papacy of Gregory XVIII it is stated:

From the Mystical Desert of El Palmar de Troya, His Holiness Pope Gregory XVIII, as true Vicar of Christ, on the watch and wide awake, continues to shepherd the flock of the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Palmarian, confided by him by her Divine Founder, Our Lord Jesus Christ. In a world of general apostasy, this Great Caudillo of the Tajo, combats present-day errors and aberrations with firmness and courage thus preparing the Church for coming apocalyptic events, which will culminate with Christ's Second Coming, very close.

Here, the text establishes the continuity with Gregory XVII and Peter II. Gregory XVIII stated that he continued their work in the end times. The new pope did not have the charismatic authority of the seer, Gregory XVII, nor the pioneer role of Peter II. He was not among the first bishops and his papacy meant a generation shift. He was born in 1959, while his predecessors were born in 1946 and 1934 respectively. The new pope presented himself as a defender of the church against the forces of darkness that reigned outside the Palmarian Ark of Salvation. He was also the Great Caudillo. He thus followed traditional Palmarian rhetoric.

Even if Peter II had declared that Christ would return in glory in the year 2034, Gregory XVIII did not mention any particular date for the Second Coming; only that it will happen soon. Part of the explanation for this omission could be that

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the leaflet was given to outsiders who visited the Basilica in Palmar de Troya or sent to people who wanted information about the church. Still, the leaflet mentions that Antichrist was born in the year 2000, referring to a “dogmatic definition” made by Peter II. According to that definition, Antichrist would “make a brief entry to the world” in the year 2012.

Early Messages from Pope Gregory

Little less than a month after the papal coronation, on 15 August 2011, Gregory XVIII signed his first encyclical. On the same day, he held a long sermon, which later was printed. The printed version is more than 40 pages long. When preaching, the pope did not follow a manuscript and the sermon is verbose and not clearly structured. In the text, the new pope comes through as annoyed and quite aggressive, particularly when accusing many of the faithful for not living according to the norms of the church, and for not realizing what a great privilege it was to be a Palmarian. They should be happy and not complain all the time. The pope asserted that the Palmarian church was under constant attack; it was threatened from all sides. Many young people had apostatized and he thought that many others were close. That was particularly the case in Ireland, which he in other documents singled out as the most problematic part of the church.

At great length, Gregory XVIII stated that the Palmarian church had become much smaller, and that nothing indicated that the exodus of members would end anytime soon. Prayer and penance were the only means for the Palmarian faithful in the current era; that was what Christ and the Virgin had told them through the “heavenly messages” to Clemente Domínguez Gómez. He emphasized that all faithful should pray for their own and other Palmarians’ salvation, but not for outsiders, as they were not worthy of such intercession.

Not surprisingly, the Palmarian church was presented as something distinct and unique. It was the only true church, founded by Christ, and could not be

compared with anything else. It was the Ark of Salvation and to remain on the ship was difficult. A constant fight against one self and the outside world was necessary to have even a chance to escape eternal perdition.

That Palmarians should be separated from others had been the norm since the foundation of the church. Still, the theme became increasingly central since the turn of the millennium. During the pontificates of Peter II and Gregory XVIII, it became *the* central issue. In his sermon on 15 August 2011, Gregory XVIII emphasized that the faithful's contacts with non-Palmarians should be minimal. There should be no unnecessary communication at work or school. School children should, for example, not talk to or play with their peers. When meeting an outsider, a Palmarian faithful should end the conversation as soon as possible, for example by stating that he or she could not talk with a person, who did not dress according to the Palmarian norms. Moreover, and most importantly, Palmarians should not have any contact at all with former Palmarians ("apostates"). Not mincing matters, Gregory XVIII stated that one word to an apostate means excommunication. The message could hardly be misunderstood.

Gregory stated that the Norms of the church, including the detailed and strict dress code and the separation from the outside world, should be well-known to all faithful. Nobody should be able to say that they are not aware of them; they have existed for a long time and were very clear. He said that many people still claimed that they did not know and that they tried to find ways to escape them. In this context,

"Norms" might be understood as Palmarian teachings in a general sense, but it should probably be interpreted in a stricter sense. "Palmarian norms" referred to a long list of rules and proscriptions, originally issued in 2004-2005, but revised several times later. In his sermons, Gregory XVIII claimed that it was basically Gregory XVII and him who draw up the original list, while the then Secretary of State, Father Isidoro María was on his "continuous apostolic journeys." In that way, Gregory XVIII could claim that the Norms was the work of his predecessor in the papacy, St. Gregory the Very Great, and that he had been an entrusted co-worker.

The words of the seer of Palmar de Troya— the first pope—could hardly be questioned.

Many of the norms had to do with Palmarian dress code and the separation from the outer world, but also with a long array of that practice that were proscribed, ranging from the reading of non-Palmarian books to Christmas trees and candles on birthday cakes. In this context, Gregory XVIII told the faithful that they were free to leave the church if they wanted; they were no prisoners. But to leave had severe consequences; they would become apostates and cannot be saved from eternal perdition.

In his verbose sermon, Pope Gregory XVIII also stated that the Palmarian church probably had less than 2,000 faithful, telling the faithful to realize what privilege it was to be a Palmarian. They were less 2,000 of a global population of some seven billion (not including those living on other planets), and in most countries there was not a single member of the only true church. Thus, they should not complain. Though already very small, the faithful remnant would probably become even more reduced. He asserted that pope Gregory XVII had prophesized that at some point in the future, only fifteen friars would remain in the Order of Carmelites of the Holy Face. At the time of the sermon, in August 2011, the number of friars was down to about 40, and the nuns numbered about the same. At its peak, there used to be about a hundred friars and at least that number of nuns.

In this part of the sermon, Gregory XVIII drew a parallel between the Palmarian Church and the Jesuit missions in colonial South America. The Jesuits wanted the Christianized Indians, with whose souls they were entrusted, to live apart from the satanic world. But according to Gregory, by the mid-eighteenth-century Freemasons had entered deeply into both state and church. As a consequence, the Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish empire and the missions. Somewhat later, the order was extinguished. He asserted that the threat against the true church came from the same source today. Freemasonry is the global enemy of the true church, and the outside world will hinder the church from growing. In the end time, the power of Satan is stronger than ever before, and to obey the pope and the church rules was necessary.

During his first months as the Palmarian pope, Gregory XVIII made some dramatic changes in the liturgical calendar. The most important was that Easter would no longer be a moveable feast. Beginning in 2012, Holy Friday would always be on 25 March, as, according to the Palmarian Bible, that was the precise date of Christ's death. It did not matter whether it would on a Friday or not. As a consequence, other moveable feasts that relate to Easter would be celebrated on precise dates, too.

Gregory XVIII also announced that a number of official books and documents would be made public in the near future. On the day of the sermon, he would sign his first encyclical, which dealt with issues he had preached about. A *Sanctorale* (Proper of the Saints) would be printed, as well as a new, updated version of the *Palmarian Devotionary*. The publication of a series of the "heavenly messages" to Clemente Domínguez Gómez/Pope Gregory XVII, "interpreted in light of the Sacred History or Palmarian Bible", should be continued. On various occasions, the faithful had been ordered to destroy older church documents. They should be replaced by revised versions, so that they did not contradict the final versions given in the Palmarian Bible, which included the complete revelation, taking away the errors found in the traditional Bible. At the publication of the Palmarian version, the faithful had been ordered to burn their old Bibles.

At the forthcoming Palmarian council in 2012, the Norms of the Palmarian church should be more clearly defined, so that they could not be misunderstood and so that they reflected the behavioral norms necessary for the true Christians in the end time. It does not seem that Gregory XVIII planned any important doctrinal developments at the Council. It would focus on morality in the Palmarian understanding; the demarcation against the outer world and "Christian decency", basically the dress code. The development of the Palmarian dogma had almost come to an end with the publication of the five-volume Palmarian Bible in 2001, and few major changes had been made during the papacy of Peter II, apart from dating the second coming of Christ to the year 2034. Neither Peter II nor Gregory XVIII claimed to receive any private apparitions, and the alleged apparitions to Gregory XVII had been the motor of Palmarian dogmatic development. He basically dictated

the bible. With the death of the seer in 2005 that era had come to an end. Now, the Palmarian Bible was there, and there were no doctrinal mistakes to correct anymore.

In the end time, the only way for the Palmarian church to grow was through reproduction. Gregory stressed that was is of utmost importance for young people to considered if they had a vocation for religious life or if they should marry. The faithful should find their state in life early on and preferably marry before the age of 21. He wrote that neither religious life, nor matrimony was an easy path, but to remain unmarried without entering religious life was egotistic and suspect. In this context, the pope mentioned that religious life had not been easy for him. He had not felt any "spiritual delight" or "spiritual joys", but always acted out of duty, and so should all faithful do.

Gregory XVIII held another, very long sermon on 8 November 2011. In this text of 48 pages, too, there is a clear focus on the separation between Palmarians and the outside world. In this respect, the message echoed the apostolic letters the Peter II wrote during his papacy, but in Gregory's text the theme became even more central. The basis of Palmarian religious life seems to be isolation, and there should be no compromises anymore. In the last days of the world, the church demanded steadfastness and total dedication from its faithful. Gregory XVIII wrote that it is impossible to be half Palmarian. No ambiguities were allowed, and all Palmarian norms should be followed. To have a large church membership does not have an intrinsic value, and he asserted that St. Gregory the Very Great used to say that he "preferred few and good".

Gregory XVIII wrote that he had signed a new decree concerning "apostates", i.e., those who had left the church or been expelled. As from the day of the sermon, 8 November 2011, all "apostate children" over the age of 18 should leave their family homes. They should not be allowed to stay with their Palmarian family members. When they had been forced to leave, Palmarians were not allowed to have any type of contact with them. They should not say or write a word to them. The shunning of ex-members should be total. Contacts with ex-Palmarians was thus considered the most harmful of all, as they were the worst enemies of Christ. They had had the privilege to be among the elect, but had made active decisions to

counteract divine will. This rule, however, did not apply to children to Palmarians who had never been church members, but that must have been a quite reduced group by 2011.

Gregory XVIII emphasized that the membership continued to shrink and stated that he did not know exactly how many faithful there currently were, but thought that it was probably down to between 1,000 and 1,500 people. It is clear that he realized that there was an exodus of members, as many left or were expelled. Many of those who left were young people, and it would mean that that few Palmarian children would be born in the near future. To save the shrinking remnant, it was most important to reduce the risks posed by the satanic outside world.

In this context, the Palmarians' use of different means of communication became a central issue. The pope claimed that newspapers, radio, TV and Internet are controlled by enemies of Christ, particularly freemasons. To the pope, there was no reason for Palmarians to read newspapers, which were filled with lies, though some members had received special permits from his predecessors. With his sermon, all these special permits were abolished.

Internet seems to have been a more complicated matter for the Palmarian leadership, and the policy changed rapidly. In 2011, faithful were allowed to have access to internet at home, but only if computers were connected to a lock device that made it possible to control its use. They were prohibited to access internet through their mobile phones, and could only have access to Internet outside the home, if its use was an integral part of their studies or work. According to Gregory, the internet issue should be discussed at the Palmarian Council, and a final decision should be taken.

In 2012, the pope issued a decree on internet use. As from 16 August 2012, the ban against internet at home was total. Under pain of excommunication reserved to the pope, the faithful should destroy every internet related item they owned, such as cables and routers, though not the computers as such. Evidently there had been some permits to use mobile internet for work purposes, but now the pope abolished them. Still, internet use that was considered necessary at school and work was

tolerated. The almost total ban of internet made the separation between the Palmarians and the outside world even stricter.

I have had access to text messages that were sent in the autumn of 2012 to Irish Palmarians, where a bishop informed the faithful of the pope's decisions. The messages deal with many different issues, but most were, in one way or another, related to the separation from the outside world or the Palmarian dress regulations. For example Palmarians were not allowed donate clothes or other things to charity shops. "The Holy Father does not want people who does not dress properly befitting from your goods". Further, they were not allowed to "buy products that support masonic organisations (such as bananas with the Unicef sticker)." Some messages also deal with the conduct of Palmarian boy and girlfriends.

Testimonies about the Papacy of Gregory XVIII

There is an increasing number testimonies from former Palmarians, who left the church during the papacy of Gregory XVIII. Many of them are young people, who grew up in the church, but left as young adults. As I have indicated, there was veritable exodus of young people from 2011 onwards, and many of them have family members who remain in the church. The testimony of Joshua Daly from Ireland, revised as late as in June 2016, is very important. Apart from being a very well-written and detailed account, Daly did not leave the Palmarians until early 2015. That means that he experienced most of Gregory's papacy and the effects it had on ordinary faithful.

In his text, Joshua Daly gives some indications about the current size of the Palmarian church. Just before he left, he was told that there were only 130-140 faithful left in Ireland. He asserts that by early 2015 there were some 250 Palmarians in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, about the same number in Nigeria, and less than a hundred in Spain. The latter estimate does probably not include friars and nuns living in Palmar de Troya. According to Daly, the rest of the members lives in the Americas, the Philippines, and the British Isles. Born in 1991, Daly states that the number of Palmarians has been steadily decreasing throughout

his life. That view concurs with many other sources, and the number of people leaving or being forced to leave have increased during the 2000s. With very few exceptions, the only new members during this period were children to Palmarians.

Joshua Daly's testimony echoes many of the themes that were presented in Gregory's first sermons as Palmarian pope, but they are, of course, described from totally different perspective. He writes about the shunning of "apostates" and the forced expulsions of young people from their homes, stating that "ex-members [were evicted] from family homes above the age of 18, be they at school or a university student, regardless if they have any financial independence." In this context, he mentions another practice that was introduced during the papacy of Gregory XVII: the "obligatory signing of a document that declares the member accept these terms of eviction if they were ever to leave. This 'agreement' is enforced at the age of 10 and upwards."

Joshua Daly also writes about pope Gregory's emphasis on making an early choice whether to enter religious life or marry. He testifies to the "increased pressure through teachings and peers to 'find a state in life', which was becoming dangerously close to arranged marriage", and continues with a description of what this could mean in practice: he "became part of a list of single youth, and ... was summoned before Gregory XVIII and two other members of the Church hierarchy, and questioned on my future 'state in life'"

Daly means that pope Gregory's decisions lead to an almost total isolation of the Palmarians. The ban against various means of communication was an important factor in this development: "Through 2011 to 2012 Gregory XVIII also clamped down on all forms of media by banning cinema, television, newspapers, magazines, video games, and virtually all communication with nonmembers. This was the kind of control being exercised by the hierarchy late 2014 and early 2015." In his testimony, Joshua Daly also writes that the church authorities were "deliberately concealing the death of its members from non-Palmarian relatives and friends".

Although Joshua Daly is one of the few who have lived through most of Gregory's papacy and written about it at length, testimonies about the total shunning of ex-members have been common on different web-forums for more than

a decade. They have become more common during the papacies of Peter II and Gregory XVIII, i.e. from 2005 onwards. Ex-members stated that they have not met their parents or siblings since leaving. Sometimes they write that they have met family members and old friend in the street, but that they had not said a word. When trying to call them, they hang up without saying anything.

From about 2004, there appeared an Irish based support group for ex-Palmarians on the internet. It published some information about the Palmarian church, including the new list of Palmarian norms, as well as a collection of testimonies from former members. This site, however, was not updated after 2006. At about the same time, there was a long discussion thread at Factnet about Palmar and the situation for ex-members. After some time, it was taken over by some ex-clergy with their own particular agendas, among them former Palmarian bishop, Fr. Luc.

Between 2007 and 2009, another discussion thread existed at the site “Above top secret”, where a discussion went on between several well-informed former members. In 2008, some Irish ex-members established a Palmarian Church Opposition movement. Under the pseudonym Apostate Anonymous, they published several messages on YouTube, based on recent documents of the Palmarians that focused on the end times, including readings from the Palmarian bible which they had been able to acquire. As second phase, the group handed over messages about their opposition and the information they had to the Palmarian headquarters in Dublin. The group seems to have been most active until 2009. Thus, in these forums, there was not much activity during the papacy of Gregory XVIII, though several people wrote about their great concern about Father Sergio Maria and the risk that he would probably be the next pope.

Palmarian Economy

Despite the exodus of members, the Palmarian economy seemed to have improved during the pontificate of Gregory XVIII, at least in comparison to the situation in the early 2000s. Gregory seemed to be at least as good a fundraiser as Manuel

Alonso was in the first decades. After a decade-long long standstill, the works on the basilica speeded up considerably. In early 2013, the Andalusian press claimed that the church's monetary influx had increased much and that the order had opened up of missions in France, Switzerland and Vietnam, while supporters in the United States and Germany also provided large sums. Photos from 2014 and 2015 showed a basically finished basilica, the façade embellished with a series of new statues, St. Francisco Franco with his halo at the center. The construction work that began in 1978 is thus more or less finished

Still, for an outsider, it is not easy to get a detailed picture of the Palmarian economy. There are many testimonies that accuse the church leaders of money laundry and tax evasion, but, as far as I know, no formal investigation has been made by Spanish authorities. In 2003, the church sold all their real estate in the city centre of Seville. They also sold buildings in other places in the years that followed. The main sources of income seems to donations from members, money inheritances and the selling of real estate that was ceded to the church by members, especially older faithful who moved to church facilities. In 2015, the Palmarians sold their headquarters in Clontarf, Dublin, but later they bought a new house in Lusk, where a new chapel is being constructed.

In May 2016, the English edition of the Spanish newspaper *El País* quoted an ex-member who wished to remain anonymous: “Only a year and a half ago a missionary brought €500,000 taped to his body from Augsburg in Bavaria – the proceeds from the sale of a house belonging to the church. I drove the car from Germany. I was a witness.” This testimony, too, indicates that the selling of real estate has been an important source of income, and that great amounts of cash was smuggled.

The End of Gregory's Papacy

On 14 January 2016, Gregory XVIII published an encyclical on the “easing of several norms”. It is a four-page document. Just as in his first sermons four and half

years before, Gregory's tone was annoyed. Now he claimed that the faithful "mortified" the friars with all their questions regarding the interpretation of the norms. He stated:

"One should not and cannot have a continual morbid fear of falling into excommunication, though we know that there will still be some who will not overcome it. Faithful fulfilment of the Norms is one thing and morbid scruples another".

Apart from the nuisance it caused him and the Palmarian clergy at large, the pope saw the many questions as a way for the faithful not to take the responsibility for their own actions. As in the 2011 sermons, he stated that all should know the rules. As expected, many of the issues in the encyclical had to do with the dress code.

The encyclical may have been a way to ease the norms, but it mainly deals with details. Still, the publication was unexpected, at least for me as an outsider, as the norms had become increasingly strict during Gregory's papacy. In the encyclical he explained that: "We do not want extremism". Therefore, the norms were eased, so that the faithful could follow them. Among the themes that he discussed in the letter was defining that tights are women's clothing, and could be used under the long skirts. He also made clear that the general prohibition against logos and texts on clothing, established by Gregory XVII, does not include small brand names. He also mentions that images of churches and crosses in schoolbooks do not need to be censored. If the intention of pictures of church interiors were to describe different architectural styles they should not be censored; otherwise they should.

As regards means of communication Gregory writes: "Of course the ban using Internet on mobiles, without express permission, continues". He stressed that nobody is allowed to be in contact with "apostates, antipalmarians, concubines or those opposed to God" in any way. Nevertheless, he allowed communication with non-Palmarian friends and relations by phone and letter, even if they usually do not dress according to Palmarian norms. In his earlier sermons, he had stated that

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Palmarians could not be friends with non-Palmarians. In school and at work, the faithful were now allowed to speak briefly with others, but never with apostates and antipalmarians. Children at school can talk to their peers. Still at recess, they could not play with girls wearing trousers.

Smoking is allowed for Palmarians, and the pope decrees that “as for expectant mothers, if they cannot give them up completely during pregnancy. We allow them to smoke just six cigarettes in the course of the day”. He finishes his eighth encyclical by stating that with this explanation and “easing of the norms”, there was nothing more to discuss:

“And now, at last, We say that even knowing that it will seem marvellous to some, to others it will not be as much, and we hope not to have to correct excesses or infringements of these Norms now eased. Neither do we await another flood of question and questions; we have already told you to use your conscience and intelligence, and when in doubt desist”.

As far as I know, the encyclical was the last formal decree Gregory XVIII wrote as pope before he leaving on 22 April 2016.

Media Coverage on the Palmarian Church

In the years before the escape of the pope, there were not many newspaper articles on the Palmarian church. Spanish papers published some articles when Peter II died in 2011, and there were articles, when the new statue of St. Francisco Franco became known. The general image presented in the article was that the Palmarian church was bizarre, very secretive and rich, but that the number of members were steadily decreasing.

In Irish media, the situation was a bit different. In recent years, there have been some TV documentaries and radio programs on the church’s activities in Ireland, and particularly during 2015 there was an increasing number of testimonies by ex-members. In this context, there was the case of an 84-year-old Palmarian

woman who was found in her home in November 2015, after having been dead for two months. She lived a very secluded life, but the news did also apply that the church did not care. In the aftermath of this sad event, Sunday Times published a longer article about the church in January 2016. Throughout the years, but especially in 2015 and 2016, information and testimonies about the Palmarians in Ireland have been published on Dialogue Ireland's webpage. In 2015, Maria Hall a former Palmarian nun published an autobiography, which is one of the most detailed accounts by an ex-member, and probably the first written a former woman religious.

Having written a couple of articles about the Palmarians from 2005 onwards, I published a 60-page research report on the Palmarian movement/church in August 2015. It is about the development of the Palmarian movement and church from 1968 onwards. The report also includes a quite detailed study of Palmarian theology. I made an effort to situate the Palmarian church within the world of Catholic apocalypticism, and describe what makes it unique. Though I have been in contact with a number of former Palmarians, the report was not much focused on their experiences.

Then, from late April 2016, the Palmarian church was suddenly in the center of media attention. Of course, there was a reason. The news about the Palmarian pope leaving the church to live with a woman was intriguing. That he stated that he saw the whole church as a scam was most interesting, too. Many times in the 15 years I have studied the Palmarian church, I have wondered if the highest leaders believed in the teachings themselves or whether it was an elaborate hoax. However, that the ex-pope now does not believe does not give a clear answer to that question. We only have his testimony: that he only recently discovered this. And we have no clear testimony about Clemente and Manuel. Did they (ever) believe in it themselves?

On 25 April 2016, three days after the event, Spanish media started to report on the ex-pope. Several TV channels broadcasted reports on the unexpected development, and many national and local newspapers wrote series of articles. After a couple of days, the ex-pope started to give interviews in newspapers and on TV.

His message in all these interviews was that he had been fooled and that he had not realized that the church was an elaborate hoax until very recently. He claimed that he had done everything right and despite having been a member of Palmarian clergy for 32 years and the pope for five, he presented himself as a victim.

Generally speaking, the interviews can hardly be called critical. The ex-pope has not been pressed on his actions as a pope and to admit his own responsibility. He has been able to quite speak freely and journalists have rarely posed critical questions. In fact, he has turned into a kind of general specialist on things Palmarian, commenting on the current development, rather than the main responsible for the church in the last five years. There is also much focus on the love story; that he left to live with his girl. For me, who have followed the Palmarian church for about 15 years, to see ex-Father Sergio María/ ex-pope Gregory XVIII sitting in blue jeans, together with his girlfriend, was a very strange experience.

The first of what would become a long series of interviews with the ex-pope was published in *ABC* Seville edition on 27 April. There, he asserted that he did not believe in the Palmarian teachings anymore. He made a voluntary choice leaving the church after finding out that the teachings built on lies. Together with his girlfriend Nieves Triviño he now lives in Monachil in the province of Granada. In the interview, he asserted that he had not stolen the BMW “pope-mobile”, but that it was a gift to him personally, and that there was a notarized deed stating just that. His message was that he now wanted to leave all things Palmarian behind him and live a new life:

[Quiero] pasar página, empezar una nueva vida. Yo he dejado aquello bien y un cambio de vida radical no se hace de un día para otro, pero yo estoy satisfecho porque ha sido una decisión muy meditada. ... Estoy tranquilo, desayunando ahora y tomando el sol, no tengo nada de temor porque soy un ciudadano más.

On 1 May 2016, *El Español* published an article which was based on a four-hour interview with the ex-pope. In this interview, he gave some more details about his leaving, but despite his former position, he does not take any responsibility; he has been fooled all these years. Nieves Triviño established contact with him in 2015,

telling him that a group of the people who were expelled from the Palmarian church in 2000 planned “rob and beat him”. The connection between these accusations and what followed it not easy to understand. But he states that he began to make investigations into Palmarian issues: “A raíz de eso empecé a hacer indagaciones que después fui confirmando por otras fuentes. Y hay algunas cosas que son aberrantes. En todos los sentido, económico y sexual”. In this interview, he calls the church and its teachings a set-up or a scam (*montaje*).

Asked if he has left many friends in the church, the ex-pope stated “Muchos. Además, quien me conoce bien, a diferencia de mis predecesores en el cargo, he sido como un padre con sus hijos.” He thus claimed that he had been closer to the faithful than any of his predecessors. He had been like a benign father to them. When asked about the generally held view of him as hardliner, he claimed that it is false. However, he admitted that he has a bad temper, but that he constantly has tried to counteract it, and that the elevation to the papacy did not affect his solid character:

Siempre he sido una persona muy abierta y nunca se me subió el cargo a la cabeza. Tengo un carácter fuerte y no me gusta que me obliguen a hacer lo que no quiero. En esas situaciones pierdo los papeles por un problema que tengo de adrenalina, que suelo tener sesenta veces más de lo normal. Si me pongo nervioso, exploto. Procuero que no ocurra.

In the long interview in *El Español*, the ex-pope was asked whether the new Palmarian leaders should fear him, as he has so much inside information. He answered that they should not, and that he did not want to think about the church politics anymore and that his successor knows everything:

No, porque saben que yo nunca iré contra ellos. No voy a echar mierda sobre El Palmar. Y el que está ahora, Pedro III, sabe todas estas averiguaciones. Él mismo oyó algunos testimonios de afectados ... Yo quiero pasar página. No pensar en el pasado y centrarme en mi nueva vida.

Throughout May 2016, a great number of articles about the ex-pope and the Palmarian church were published in the Spanish press and there were many TV

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reportages including interviews with former Palmarians. The Andalusian Canal Sur broadcasted an hour-long documentary about the church, including interviews with several ex-members, both clergy and laypeople. There was a long TV interview with the ex-pope in Antena 3, and Telecinco broadcasted a whole series of short reportages about Palmar, including interviews with the ex-pope.

About a month after leaving Palmar, the ex-pope gave an interview to *El País*. The article was later translated in its English edition. In this interview, he was even more explicit about the foundation of the church “It’s all a set-up, particularly a financial one” and that “They’re just using the miracle of the Virgin Mary as a front.” As in the earlier interviews, he does not claim any personal responsibility. He has not done anything wrong. He was fooled by the set-up for 32 years. It is like he never was a Palmarian church leader, despite being a member of the leading triumvirate for almost two decades, and the pope for five years.

The Successor’s Views

The successor of Gregory XVIII, pope Peter III (Josef Markus Odermatt, Father Eliseo María) has not given any interviews or comments to the media. Still, his official comments to Gregory’s resignation is known through his first apostolic letter about “a sad event in the true church”, which was issued on 2 May 2016. The encyclical was only intended for the Palmarian faithful, but it was made public a month later on a Facebook group following the events in Palmar, in its original German version. It must have been translated into other languages too.

In the apostolic letter, Peter III first tells what everybody knows: that pope Gregory has apostatized. Before leaving he had said that he lost faith. Since Easter he had not read mass, nor prayed the penitential rosary. He had met an “apostate woman” and lusted for her. When leaving he took the papal car with him. A couple of days after the escape, they had discovered that jewelry from the images of Christ, the Virgin, St Joseph and St Teresa of Avila were missing. To steal from a church building is a clear case of sacrilege, and the context makes it clear whom

the new pope regarded as the main suspect. Peter III also refers to “sources on the Internet”, who claims that Gregory had a personal fortune of some 2 million Euros.

Peter III continues his letter by naming some of the cardinal sins he thinks that Gregory has committed during his time in the order and during the papacy. He did not show any love. He did not think about anyone but himself. He was insufferable. He enjoyed luxury and was extremely vain. Peter III makes comparisons with other bad popes, who according to the Palmarian History of the Popes are in Hell, including the infamous Alexander VI (Borgia).

Despite living a relaxed life himself, for others, however, Gregory XVIII established unnecessarily harsh norms. According to Peter III, the pope should be a father, not a tyrant. One should love the Palmarian Norms, and the ex-pope is an example of what could happen if one does not follow the norms and wander on the road of the world. Gregory’s papal motto was “receiver of Christ” (*Receptor Christi*), but due to his apostasy and the grave sins he has committed, he will become “the receiver of God’s anger”. The Palmarian faithful must pray and make penance in order to compensate for the ex-pope’s sins and all the harm he has caused. Not to smoke is such a penance, but smoking will not lead to excommunication. To refrain, however, is a sign of charity.

The new pope asserts that pope Peter II knew that Sergio María had many vices, but said that he could not find any other suitable successor. From the very beginning it turned out to be a bad pontificate, one of the worst in church history, according to Peter III. But now things will change. Interestingly enough, he uses the same expression as the ex-pope when referring to the future: that it is time to turn the page, with optimism and hope. Peter III’s papal motto is *De Gloria Ecclesiae*. It should be understood as the spiritual glory of the church, not material wealth.

In the current situation, all Palmarian faithful should strive to restore the good reputation of the church. Peter III asks them to pray for him, so that his work will contribute to their salvation and holiness. Parents have the co-responsibility for the sins of their children. So has the Vicar of Christ. He should watch over them, so that they grow in holiness. All Palmarians have the responsibility to defend the

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honour of God, Pope and Church. All baptized Palmarians are soldiers of Christ. No special papal guard will be needed and the guard, which was established by Gregory XVIII, is therefore abolished. Towards the end of the letter, Peter III mentions the membership situation and points out that there is great need for priests and nuns. He claims that now, when Gregory has left, convent life is totally different than before. Now the convents are places of peace, love and brotherhood.

Finally, he informs that the official papal coronation will take place on 16 July, on the feast of Our Lady of Palmar. The faithful who come to Palmar will receive plenary indulgence.

Final remarks