



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Fall 1993 | Vol. XIX, No. 2,3

“QUID EST VERITAS?”

HUMAN FREEDOM AFTER CASEY

John R. Meyer



RECENT ISSUE OF CRISIS CONTAINS AN INTERESTING ARTICLE BY RUSSELL HITtinger entitled ‘Et tu, Justice Kennedy?’¹ which provides a detailed historical review of the juridical iter and thought processes leading up and subsequent to *Roe v. Wade*. The principal thesis of that work is that the interpretation of *Roe* is centered upon a reaffirmation of what is commonly termed the “central holding” of *Roe*. The content of the “holding” notion includes two primary arguments: i) the Fourteenth Amendment understanding of “liberty” includes a woman’s decision to abort a pre-viable fetus, and ii) overturning *Roe* poses a threat to “social stability,” “the rule of law,” and the “integrity of the judiciary.” Hittinger comments that “what makes *Casey* different from our previous judge-made laws on abortion is the *migration* of the abortion right from privacy to liberty.” The three cited justices explain that “at the heart of liberty is the right to *define* one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of life.”

Hittinger succinctly records for us the juridical itinerary culminating in the *Casey* decision, which for all practical purposes is a radical endorsement of the human person as self-constitutory. The First Things editorial of October summarizes the Court’s view of human freedom as “the liberty of self-will, self-expression, and indeed self-constitution.” Initially, the Supreme Court determined that “the right to privacy” prevents civil interference in the marital life of people. Thus state statutes forbidding the sale or use of contraceptives was declared unconstitutional (*Griswold v. Connecticut* [1965]) because it would allow an unjust invasion of the mutual marital relationship. In 1971 the Court ruled that the sale of drugs or instruments of a contraceptive nature cannot be prevented by State law (*Eisenstadt v. Baird*). The application of the “right to privacy” proved inadequate in this case because civil intervention affected only individuals and not the marital relationship *per se*.

The earlier *Griswold* decision had described the “right to privacy” as “surrounding the marriage relationship” whereas in *Eisenstadt* it now comes to inhere in the individual. *Roe v. Wade* (1973) amplified the notion of this right to encompass a panoply of supposed individual values, psychological, social, economic, and others. All of these are very important but at the same time circumstantial considerations which do not alter the essential nature of the act of abortion. *Roe* effectively extracted the notion of the mutual relationship of the persons in the institution of matrimony by affirming the exclusive and unilateral right of one type of individual, the woman, to procure an abortion. In *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) the “right to privacy” was restricted to the marital state as the Court refused to extend the “right to privacy” to include homosexual sodomy. But in his dissenting opinion Justice Blackmun said that the notion of “right to privacy” had to be redefined by introducing the concept of “self-definition.” He wrote that this right was essentially one of autonomy understood as “the ability to lay claim to one’s own personality through free choice.” The *Casey* decision actually makes use of this re-definition of “the right to privacy” in order to promote an almost unlimited conception of human freedom in the area of sexual activity, whether procreative or not.

Whether there has been a “migration” of thought is less important than what this decision patently affirms: “human beings define who they are.” Anyone who believes in the existence of a divine Creator will find this description of liberty as an usurpation of the prerogatives that only properly speaking pertain to God. Only God can define what he creates precisely because he gives his creatures all of their being. We therefore suggest that a return to a non-skeptical assessment of truth in morality is of essential importance if we hope to reach any form of common agreement as to what good moral conduct consists of. As St. John records for us, “*veritas liberabit vos*” (Jn. 8:32), the truth will set you free. One contemporary moral theologian suggests that free moral choices constitute what we are and what we become, not what we define ourselves to be.² Perhaps the ideas of free choice and self-determination are not incompatible after all; the real problem lies in defining what we are and what we can or cannot licitly do as morally acting persons.

What is really at issue here is the question of what exactly should it mean for us to be “pro-choice,” not as it is commonly understood in “abortion-right” parlance but as a free moral act. One certainty has come to light in the abortion controversy: each human being is personally responsible for the choices they make and legal statutes should focus on the common good rather than that of the individual. Our times call for a deep work of cultural and religious formation in order to enable the individual members of society to conform their conduct, in both private and public affairs, to the laws “written” into our human nature by God.

I. HUMAN FREEDOM IN LIGHT OF THE CASEY DECISION

The rather ominous quotation cited by Hittinger from Lawrence Tribe and Peter Rubin’s book *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes* (1990) is particularly revealing: “[the abortion right is the] liberty not to be moulded physically and psychologically into a mother.” Although any citation taken out of context can be easily misinterpreted, in this instance, the underlying presuppositions seem to be rather obvious. Human liberty or freedom has been er-

ected as an absolute right beyond the measure or standard of any thing or any one other than the individual in se. The celebrated right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, designed to protect and guarantee religious freedom, has become an exclusively individual right. It is a right which can be agreed upon by consensus but not be delineated by authority. We could interpret Tribe and Rubin’s description of the “abortion right” as ascribing the power of controlling the freedom of a woman to a pre-viable fetus. Implicit here is the idea that the unborn child usurps the mother’s freedom to act as she wishes, or at least it compromises her options for action. But is this really true?



It could be contested that once a woman has conceived a fetus, whether viable or not *extra uterum*, she is already a mother. But using the orientation of these authors perhaps we could paraphrase the above description to read: “the potential child is a thing, precisely because it is incapable of voluntary human acts, a thing that alters the *personality* of a responsible human being,” i.e., the potential mother. Of course most people who defend the “abortion right” would respond that it is not the fetus nor the putative father that robs a woman of her freedom but rather any legisla-

tive barriers that prevent access to abortifacient agents or abortive surgical procedures, because these restrictions deny a woman the exercise of her free choice. The most important right for a woman, they contend, is the right to terminate the only thing which can truly be given by one human being to another, life. Such an argument is incorrect, morally, because free choice is not directly affected by legal dictates: legislation serves to guide the good moral conduct of citizens and strives to ensure the common good of all members of society.

Clearly, moral education needs legislative science, but its function is to educate and to promote the good use of our faculties as children of God. Aristotle perceived this and placed great importance on the role of the legislator and the State in contributing to the pursuit of virtue by the citizenry. He writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “legislators should urge people toward virtue and

exhort them to aim at what is fine.”³ Excellent laws express the personal attention of the State for the education of the people, “for just as in cities the provisions of law and the [prevailing] types of character have influence, similarly a father’s words and habits have influence, and all the more because of kinship and because of the benefits he does; for his children are already fond of him and naturally ready to obey.”⁴

The question we propose to address here is how can a concept of human freedom, understood as unlimited personal liberty, have developed in a culture and a society which is built on the respect for the dignity of the human person? Perhaps this can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that personal dignity is not a human invention of our nation’s Founding Fathers but is a revealed truth of faith. Man is created in God’s image and likeness (cf. Gen. 1:26), thus man, like God, is both free and is capable of self-knowledge through his actions and his dealings with others.⁵ Moreover, this dignity is not only manifest in an intrinsic fashion as creatures made in God’s image, but we are also intelligent beings. Therefore, we can act by way of good moral choices to attain our natural and supernatural end: happiness in this life and a hundred-fold more in the next when we act and choose according to God’s will. And it is precisely the conscience which enables us to make good judgments and sound choices.

Human actions are something like words through which we give ourselves an identity as moral beings; our moral character is acquired by us through the choices we freely make. Although it is true that we are free to choose what we do, we are not free to determine or define what we do as right or wrong. Human dignity includes the capacity to understand in some measure what God expects of us and to freely choose to relate ourselves to Him through our actions by acting and living in accord with right reason. Aristotle believed that happiness is avidly bound up with a life of reason concerned with action: man’s good is his good functioning - “the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.”⁶ And the best and most perfect virtue is *sophia* or understanding whose specific activity is *theoria*, contemplation.⁷ As Christians, we understand that our highest activity is not simply an appreciation for what is good action but that God enables us to discover what is a good action in the concrete circumstances and the moral context of each act. As a matter of fact our life is a colloquium with God in which we enjoy a participation in his life, “[we] participate in the light of

the divine mind.”⁸

II. THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

One of the most characteristic cultural traditions of our time is a heightened awareness of the inherent dignity of the human person as the authentic foundation of human freedom. Unfortunately, many of our contemporaries have forgotten, or at least they do not seem to realize, that this fact is known both by way of human reason and the revealed Word of God. The latter is especially important because it concerns the origin or source of human dignity and thus is important for a clear appreciation of its inherent value. The Church magisterium has discussed this “truth of man,” of man’s special dignity, on several occasions.⁹ Of particular interest for us is the Declaration, *Dignitatis humanae*, which states that “all men ... are by their own nature impelled, and are morally bound, to seek the truth” - “they are bound, too, to adhere to the truth they know and to order their whole life according to the requirements of the truth.”¹⁰ True or sound moral judgments of conscience require that one both know and recognize the dictates of the truth. John Henry Newman pointed out, however, that this judgment of conscience is not easily performed as a disinterested operation because we can readily cede to rationalizations: “the aim of most conscientious and religious men is not how to please God, but how to please themselves without displeasing God.”

Another consideration we should consider is that the incarnation of the Word of God shows that man is not merely like God but that he is called to be God-like. We are constituted as beings which are essentially receptive to God’s divine life; we are creatures that are made for God. In the words of St. Augustine, “you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”¹¹ William May has pointed out that we find both in St. Thomas and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council that human beings possess a two-fold dignity, both being intrinsic to our being. One is an endowment or gift, and the other is an achievement or an acquisition.¹² How then might we proceed in our discussion of good human free choice? One promising approach is a discussion on the relationship of truth to conscience.¹³



The personalism of John Paul II addresses the “truth about man” and suggests that it is centered on the *selfhood* of the human person. The Holy Father understands this to mean that the norms of moral conduct grow out of the truth about our personal being. Thus moral norms must be internalized and not simply applied from “outside”; we as persons are made for the truth, and we can only live in truth if we understand it.¹⁴ A man can be good and act well only if he is truly wise. When applied to matrimony the love present between a man and a woman is centered on their capacity for self-donation. And this capacity of making oneself a gift to another is founded on selfhood and the process of active self-determination through free moral acts. Although a relationship of a mother to a gestating child differs from the nuptial union of marriage, it is easy to see how the mother’s act of self-donation in the marital state gives the potential child a share in her own life and the life of her spouse.

The love between husband and wife serves as the context of a new creative moment by God; it is the medium of selflessness in which God communicates new life. This life is, in its deepest sense, the gift of “personhood.” It is a gift that cannot be given by them but must come from God. We find ourselves face to face with the problem of how God gives a person their existence. The creative intervention of God does what we cannot do: only God can create the “person” in the context of mutual human love. According to the classical definition of the person, he/she is *sui iuris et alteri incommunicabilis*, a law unto itself and incommunicable to others. The “Law of God” is written into our personal nature and we cannot communicate it to another. Moreover, the willingness to bring a pre-viable life to term consolidates the initial community of love in which conception occurs.¹⁵

One might object to this “romantic” appreciation of sexual union by citing the fact that the generation of human life outside the context of marital communion is not prevented by God. There seems to be no divine provision for the authenticity of human self-donation between two persons prior to the creation of a new human life. Actually, this fact is not really a problem to our discussion but does in fact support the personalist approach to human love. In the mind of Karol Wojtyla the most radical form of human self-giving takes place between a man and a woman in the act of spousal love, a type of love which entails the surrender of oneself to another.¹⁶ And this spousal surrender is possible precisely because

the human person is *sui iuris* (belongs to him/herself). This fact affords the possibility of *selling* oneself to another, of throwing one’s “self” or “person” away in acts of love that lack the guarantee of authentic self-donation, the mark of permanent commitment. God respects our freedom so much that he does not violate the laws of nature set into motion by our free human acts. He does not prevent a bad human act even when it is an abuse of one’s own self and the *personality* of another human being.

A man who simply “takes” a woman, in the absence of an authentic mutual offering of “self” performs a physical act akin to the marital one, but that act does not affect the “interiority” of either person.¹⁷ Each one remains excluded from the inner self of the other, merely using one another’s physical abilities for egotistical gain. In order to appropriate the good that inheres in the other person each one must allow themselves to be known in a personal manner. This demands that the subject be open to the self of the other, and that they be willing to accept and grant full autonomy to that other self. We could say that these predisposing elements to true human love prepare each one to be receptive to the self-donation of the other and to the gift of spiritual life from God.¹⁸

Where there is no commitment of one person to another there is no authentic love, no true gift of one to the other, and thus there is no deep love for the possible resultant human life of such a union. This would in part explain why abortion on demand is so widely acclaimed in societies that do not effectively educate in the virtue of chastity and legalize marital divorce. The permanence of the family is not guaranteed by the legislative body nor is the indissolubility of the marriage bond viewed as a good but rather as an onerous burden.¹⁹

III. Moral Acts as Self-Determining Actions

The subjectivity of human acting addresses the phenomenon of self-determination as well as that of self-awareness or self-presence. One can make a distinction between what occurs “in man” and what he/she does by way of free choices, and this is most evident to a person when they consider an action in relation to the truth, when we make judgments with the conscience.²⁰ The attraction or power of a moral responsibility, duty, or obligation draws us out of ourselves, but it also reminds us that it is we who dispose ourselves to act in a specific manner; we determine what we are by way of our

moral acting.²¹ Only man exists for his own sake, and the dignity of his/her selfhood is decided or determined by each person through their moral actions. For this reason we say that a human person truly determines their destiny. Our lives are not simply in the hands of blind fate or good fortune.²² Aristotle writes of a principle in the soul which gives rise to both good natural desire and correct intellectual and deliberative desire, and that principle is God.²³

God is a final cause for the soul, not the efficient cause. Thus man lives in obedience to the commands of the soul and not as a direct response to divine guidance. For the Philosopher God is the supreme arche but our intellectual faculty possesses a two-fold arche, one that enjoys “contact” with God and the other which is influenced by the senses and directs our actions. God does not issue commands to us but rather we command ourselves. Wisdom or understanding is the epitactic *arche* that is capable of commanding us for the sake of God and in order to serve and contemplate Him. Choices that move us to the contemplation of God are best because the Deity is the noblest criterion of judgment; God is related to *sophia* as the principal object of contemplation.²⁴ Thus the “best life” for man in Aristotle is both practical (political) and theoretical activity: “it is a life of practical wisdom enlightened by nobility and looking towards *theoria*.”²⁵ This explains his remarks concerning choice; man’s choices must have an object worthy of choosing.²⁶

A better understanding of the human person and his/her moral judgments can help us re-discover the real reason why human decisions or choices can be erroneous. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote that “you shall hear but not understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed” (Is. 6:9-10). St. Augustine explains that “love for the shadows ends up making the eyes become unable to see the face of God. Therefore, the more a man gives in to his weakness, the more he slips into darkness.”²⁷ In “The City of God” he writes: “in the beginning free will was able not to sin, at the end of time it will be unable to sin.”²⁸ For Augustine the proper use of our free will is of paramount importance, not only to avoid sin but also to

live well so that we attain our supernatural end, to be holy.

What does the fact that all human beings are sinners have to do with what we are addressing here? Another early Father of the Church, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, wrote that after the Fall “those who have abandoned God and have darkened their souls have distracted minds, and like drunken and blind men imagine what is not true.”²⁹ These are powerful words, and they may be difficult for many to accept, but we all know how easy it is to succumb to the lure of present desires, illusions and passions. The same author writes: “men ... did not look towards the truth”; “they no longer appeared as rational beings, but from their behaviour were considered to be irrational...”³⁰ We find of course that our Lord spoke of this need for a clean heart in order to understand the things of God. Jesus teaches that the source of all sin is man’s soul (cf. Mt. 5:21-32), and that the human heart is the organ of the ethical life of man (cf. Mk. 7:14-23; Mt. 15:17-20; 6:22; 12:23f.). Man must be well disposed in his heart if he hopes to know truth and to do good. Let us examine very briefly how St. Thomas addresses this topic.


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IV. HUMAN CHOICE IN THE THOUGHT OF ST. THOMAS

For St. Thomas sinning was due to an abuse of freedom which leads man to serve creatures in place of God. This servitude to created things causes one to succumb to a *servitus peccati* as he termed it, causing the loss of true freedom.³¹ The “cleavage” created

by sin in man’s relationship with God also destroys the rapport of that person with his/her neighbor. This social breakdown in man’s relationship with others was described as self-isolation by Paul Tillich.³² Sin arises from the heart and it affects a person’s relations with others; it is both a personal evil and a lesion to the social community.³³ According to the mind of Thomas sin is essentially egoism, and sins against our neighbor derive from an interior form of hatred. This hatred for one’s neighbor implies that the sinner has developed a disordered human will (*deordinatur voluntas homini*),³⁴ it is the final step in the progression of sin. Sin impedes a proper respect for the good, the divine good and the good of our neighbor.³⁵ This is why in the Christian conception of sin liberation

refers to an interior deliverance from the dominion of sin.³⁶

Augustine criticized his Roman contemporaries for willfully concealing from themselves and others an awareness of their corrupted will. This raises an interesting question: how can we explain the reality of a binding conscience and ignorance of moral evil in our acts? St. Thomas agrees with Augustine's assessment: the concealment occurs due to the collusion of the will in evil. But Thomas carries the idea a step further by integrating the Aristotelian notion of *synderesis*, the natural disposition to apprehend the primary precepts of natural law, with the Augustinian darkening of the *conscientia*. Thomas understands that this natural disposition for the reception of first principles (*synderesis*) is infallible *in se*³⁷ but that the application of those general principles to specific situations (*conscientia*) can be erroneous.³⁸ Therefore, mistakes in moral and practical judgments are derivatives of fallacious judgments reached by the *conscientia*.³⁹

Thomas uses the term *electio* (choice) to designate our free moral choices which form the judgment of the *conscientia*. *Conscientia* is the application of first moral principles to specific acts while *electio* is an act of the will directed to the choice of an "end" that serves as a means to our ultimate end, an end which is not subject to choice.⁴⁰ Our conscience can err either because its judgment was deduced from a true premise(s) joined to a false one or because its conclusion is false due to fallacious reasoning. This means that conscience can be in error while at the same time its decisions remain as binding judgments "in conscience."⁴¹ The decision taken is binding *per accidens* and not *per se* because it is founded on an erroneous judgment.⁴² Furthermore, an incorrect moral judgment indicates that the person must have admitted some type of contradiction into their set of moral beliefs which gives rise to contradictory assertions by the conscience. The significance of this is that full rationality or moral reasonableness is not a requisite condition for a judgment's genuine binding force. The lesson would seem to be clear. We must be very attentive to the way we form the conscience, and quite sensitive to the veracity of the moral precepts we adopt.

However, the human conscience can become deformed and make erroneous judgments even when it possesses all of the intellectual factors necessary to carry out good practical decisions. The basic moral attitude and life of the individual, if not in agreement with the

moral principles of the conscience, can injure the rectitude with which that faculty operates. The intellect and the will, knowledge and moral behavior, are two vital human faculties that interpenetrate one another in such a way that it is difficult to identify in which of the two a moral disorder first arose. One thing is certain though, both of them mutually influence and assist one another in the process of corrupting the conscience.⁴³ As Carlos Cardona writes, "the heart is never estranged from the truth. Strictly speaking, it is not the intellect that understands nor the will that desires, rather it is the man who always thinks with his mind, desires with his will, what he wants to know and what he knows he wants."⁴⁴

It is not sufficient, then, that all of the moral principles required to make a good judgment be present to the conscience because it is quite possible to elude the light of conscience when one is lacking in moral virtues.⁴⁵ When one's moral conduct disagrees with the dictates of the conscience, but there is a struggle to follow the principles and to make sound judgments, the light of truth is not lost. However, if one does not make a concerted effort to correct those errors, a deformation of the conscience ensues. Once vice takes hold it is nearly impossible to detect or understand the light of truth communicated by God to the heart: "*Auditu audietis, et non intellegitis*" (Acts 28:26). God no longer leads as He Himself wishes to,⁴⁶ and His divine life is removed from the soul. Man guides himself instead of allowing God to do so in his conscience, and he breaks the strongest bond present between man and God, the conscience, which is a guide as long as it submits to the law of God.⁴⁷

V. CONSCIENCE IN THE MIND OF JOHN PAUL II

We currently find ourselves in the midst of a crisis of faith which affects our culture at a critical neuralgic point, the heart or conscience of man. Martin Heidegger recognized the tragic importance of this crisis in Western culture and attributed its cause to a denial of the revealed truth concerning the reality of the world as created.⁴⁸ The initiation of this tragedy goes back to Descartes and his philosophical program of methodical doubt which names man as the ultimate arbiter of all truth: "Man knows himself with absolute certitude as that *ente* whose being is the most certain. Man becomes the foundation and the measure that are placed by himself in order to found and measure all certitude and all truth."⁴⁹ Nietzsche carries this Cartesian view to its logical philosophi-

cal conclusion: the “psychology” of man is primary, even more important than metaphysics. Man has become the subjectum that lies at the base of all reality: “Only with the doctrine of the Superman inasmuch as it is the doctrine of the unconditional predominance of man in the ente, does modern metaphysics reach the extreme and complete determination of its essence.”⁵⁰ In this way not only the doctrine of faith but also any natural knowledge of God and any morality founded in that knowledge is excluded. This causes an inversion of the very notion of good and evil,⁵¹ it is now simply “an experiment with truth.”⁵²

In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Poenitentiae*, John Paul II writes that we cannot construct a sound society without God or *against* God: “an exclusion of God, through direct opposition to one of his commandments, through an act of rivalry, through the mistaken pretension of being ‘like him’ “ (Gen. 3:5). Moreover, “the rupture with Yahweh simultaneously breaks the bond of friendship that had united the human family.” When God is excluded from society there arises a loss of the *sense of sin*, and this moral loss primarily affects the conscience. *Gaudium et spes* describes the conscience as “the most secret core and sanctuary of man”;⁵³ it is a judging faculty which is “strictly related to human freedom.”⁵⁴ The loss of the sense of sin is closely linked with moral conscience, so much so that any obscuring of it inevitably affects “the search for truth and the desire to make a responsible use of freedom.”⁵⁵ All three of these phenomena, the loss of the sense of sin, the darkening of the conscience, and an inadequate use of reason are a consequence of the denial of God, resulting in loneliness and alienation. The Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus* affirms that “a person is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God.”⁵⁶

The true significance of sin eludes us unless it is based on its theological dimension: sin is an offense against God. Sin loses its authentic meaning in a world that prescind of God because it is reduced to being a mere compliance with or violation of accepted social convention, an act which is a lack of courtesy or attention to another’s preferences, or a simple error in calculation in selecting adequate means to an end. Without God our freedom loses its reference to truth and becomes concerned principally with the exercise of its function free of any opposition. It becomes a self-affirmation of

the person that does not serve truth. The loss of the sense of sin empties moral values of their radical superiority to other licit values, be they biologic, physical, economic, social or cultural. A first step in the right direction is to recognize that a person can live the truth only if they understand that it is attained through intelligent obedience, that is, in trusting the truth and by confiding in the “truth about man” as a beloved child of God.

We do not *define* ourselves but determine our destiny based upon how we correspond to the “truth of man” inherent in us and revealed to us by God. The truth must be loved, sought and served for its own worth, even to the point of sacrificing our own personal interests - our own life if necessary. Cicero wrote that “all virtues and moral quality (the honest) which emanates from them and binds them, should be sought for themselves.”⁵⁷ But are there nowadays people who seek for virtue for its own sake?

Love for the truth is constitutive of the human personality, and the pursuit of truth ensures the conservation of our dignity as children of God. Karol Wojtyla believes that the human conscience should strive to be identified with the *mente Dei*, and only Christ knows what is in the heart of man (cf. Jn. 2:25). The “Good News” is that he reveals it to us as a participation in the Father’s providential plan of salvation. Our Lord “evokes an awareness of sin” in us so that we do not accuse others of our own sins.⁵⁸ Moreover, a religious person realizes that God’s knowledge of them penetrates more deeply into their being than they themselves can enter. And God’s judgment of us goes much deeper than the mere assessment of the performance of good acts or bad ones. God can even accept the erroneous judgments made by our conscience when this occurs out of ignorance although He knows when it is culpable or not. God can discern when there is true ignorance or only feigned blindness, or it results from negligence or a failure to fight against bad tendencies forming in the will.⁵⁹ These considerations move us to reaffirm the need to know ourselves in a profound way and to make a sincere effort to form our will to please God.⁶⁰

The Second Vatican Council emphasizes that there is a natural law and a Gospel law that establish certain limits which should be observed even by a person who is defending their own personal rights-⁶¹ If these limits are not respected, harm is caused that person as well as many others, and this is especially true with the

theme of life: “whatever is opposed to life itself ... [is] indeed shameful ... they poison human civilization, they degrade those who so act more than those who suffer the injury ...”⁶² Our freedom is an attribute of the person, not understood as absolute independence but in self-dependence that is linked with love for the truth. We are dependent on the truth to know ourselves and to know how to act well. Karol Wojtyla writes that “this freedom finds its most striking expression in conscience, whose proper and entire function consists in making action dependent on truth.”⁶³ Etienne Gilson touches on the heart of the problem



Karol Wojtyla

for sinful man when he writes that the metamorphosis of the “City of God” is the “history of an obstinate effort to make this eternal city a temporal one ...”⁶⁴

Wojtyla appreciates all the works of God as being the fruit of love and man’s capacity of dominion over material things, a benefit of the Covenant established by God. He created man in such a way that we could discover the natural laws of creation and dominate them for our own benefit and the glory of the Creator. This gift of discernment affords man a way of acting that requires moral responsibility, choices and decisions which can open his heart to life itself, to the gift of divine grace that is found in Christ. Therefore, man is not simply in the world or in himself, but he exists in relation to other spiritual creatures and God. He is in a state of self-donation before God. We can perceive God’s love for us and we can also love God.⁶⁵ The truth puts man in contact with God and his own destiny: “The dignity proper to man, the dignity that is held out to him both as a gift and as something to be striven for, is inextricably bound up with truth.... Thus it is truth that makes man what he is. His relationship with truth is the deciding factor in his human nature and it constitutes his dignity as a person.”⁶⁶

The Church shows man the truth of his being loved by God as well as his call to love God: it is a special dignity that distinguishes him from all other creatures and sets the stage for his adoption to divine filiation in the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. J. L. Manes comments that the Gospel reveals to us that the center of our life transcends the merely human level of existence, that a true *humanization* is only achieved in God and by God.

This message manifests that our deepest hopes and aspirations reflect the fact that we are made in his image. When we are superficial and remain only on the surface of things and events, we fail to encounter God as He wishes. We lose the deep meaning of reality whenever we forfeit the category of gift and self-donation; life is the result of a free decision by God to give His life to us.⁶⁷

We must ask ourselves more frequently what is the truth and from where does it come? Only God is the truth, and only He can provide us with the moral criteria to live as he designed

us to live, with the dignity of children of God. John M. Finnis writes that the moral principles we use to live well come from God: “Intellectual rigor demands that we ask for the source of our understanding of the principles of natural law. Like all reasonable demands for an explanation, this demand, when conscientiously pursued, leads us to affirm an entity that by its existence explains the very possibility of explanation, and in particular explains the existing of all our powers of understanding and explaining, our ability to respond to the attractiveness of those goods and to the rational appeal of those principles. Once we have rationally affirmed the existing of that all-explaining entity, God, it is our turn to fall silent and listen to the affirmation that God has made in human history. What God has affirmed about the dignity and responsibilities of mankind is now no longer a matter of speculation; it is a matter of acknowledging the fact, the historical fact ...”⁶⁸

God is the truth to be searched for in our lives so that we can, in fact, make good moral choices, and so that we can continue to make really free choices. Those are absolutely necessary if we hope to foster the growth of individual human beings who reflect the fact that they were made in God’s own image. We have studied the effect of sin on man’s ability to make sound moral judgments as it is understood in classical Catholic theology. Our purpose was to reaffirm the importance of the formation of the human conscience of each and every member of our society, be they Catholic or not. This is a task that everyone must feel responsible for, that all of us must contribute to, and that all can make happen if we honestly search for truth in the gospel message of Christ

who as the Son of God shows us the Father who is Truth.⁶⁹

After having been tried by Caiaphas, Jesus was brought to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate, who asks him if he is king: “*Tu es rex iudaiorum?*” Jesus responds by saying that he bears witness to the truth; everyone “who is of the truth hears my voice” (Jn. 8:37). Christ reigns over those who accept and practice the truth revealed by him. But Pilate, seeing that he is innocent, refuses to release him and contents himself with asking, what to him, was a question that is unanswerable: “*Quid est veritas?*”

(Jn. 8:28). Just as in the ancient city of Babel, where “the people sought to build a city, organize themselves into a society and to be strong and powerful without God, if not precisely against God”.⁷⁰ perhaps we need to take a serious look at what really motivates our lives, and what is the true goal to which we aspire. Is it the promised *Civitas Dei* or a transitory and ephemeral *civitas hominum*? We would do well to recall the words of Jesus Christ, “*veritas liberabit vos*” - the truth will make you free (Jn. 8:32), and seriously strive to create an environment conducive to its attainment.



NOTES

1R. Hittinger, “Et tu, Justice Kennedy?” in *Crisis* 10/8 (1992), pp. 16-22.

2Vid. G. Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus Christ, I. Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago, 1983), pp. 41-72.

3Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 10, 1180a 6.

4NE 10, 1180b 5.

5Aristotle understood that a friend is another self or an alter ego (NE 9, 1170b 6) so that the consciousness of a friend’s life is an avenue to self-consciousness especially if that friend is a good person. The underlying reason for this is that “we can contemplate our neighbors better than ourselves, and their actions better than our own” (ibid., 1169b 34). What Aristotle appears to be saying is that the conscience we possess is an imperfect one, and we can sense the goodness of another better than we can sense our own. Only God possesses a perfect or pure conscience, but man needs friendship in order to perfect his own conscience (cf. R. A. Gauthier and J. Y. Jolif, *L’Ethique d’Aristote*, 2nd ed. [Paris-Louvain, 1970], ii/2, p. 761.)

6A. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford, 1992), p. 5.

7Aristotle, NE 10, 1177a 20-1178a 8.

8Past. Const., *Gaudium et Spes*, 15.

9Leo XIII, *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888); Pius XII, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937); idem., Radio message of Dec. 24, 1942; John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963); Paul VI, *Dignitatis humanae* (1965); John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* (1979); *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987); *Centesimus annus* (1991).

10*Dignitatis humanae*, 2.

11Augustine, *Confessions* I, 1.

12W.E. May, “Making True Moral Judgements and Good Moral Choices” in *Faith & Reason* 13 (1987), pp. 283-299.

13The Jews were the only group among the ancient peoples who identified the object of religious worship with the source of law and moral conscience. Moreover, they were aware of a divine indwelling of God in man. Christian tradition carried forward a profound renovation of the Judaic view of Law recognizing the inherence of God’s designs for salvation in our nature. Our faith not only informs us about how we should act but it also acts as a spiritual vehicle or power that transforms us internally through the communication of God’s own life to the soul. Christianity, then, reinterprets the Hebraic understanding of faith imbuing ethics by adding an operative dimension to our being. Our faith can “empower” the individual believer with a dynamis (power) to perform work as operatio Dei, as work of God by way of His grace.

14Cf. J.F. Crosby, “The Personalism of John Paul II as the Basis of his Approach to the Teaching of *Humanae Vitae*” in *Trust the Truth: A symposium on the twentieth anniversary of the Encyclical Humanae Vitae*, R.E. Smithe, ed. (Brain-tree, MA, 1988), pp. 37-63, esp. p. 40.

15The continuous re-affirmation of the worth of the pre-viable personal life proclaims the sacred and dignified nature of personal life in general - the gestation of a human life in her womb is a statement concerning her understanding and appreciation of the inherent value of that form of life as coming from God and reflecting God’s way of being.

16K. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (New York, 1981), pp. 95-100.

17Many of these considerations are taken from an essay written by Damian Fedoryka entitled “Towards a Concept and a Phenomenology of the Gift,” March 4, 1992.

18Another important fact must be considered as well. The intention of self-donation must be benevolent, that is to say, the subject must truly desire the good of the other person if he/she is to become a recipient of the personal good which the other can give as gift. The intention of benevolence allows the two parties to enter into the other and raise them to their level of love. Of course, the opposite effect can ensue when one desires to possess another or some “thing” of another in an inordinate way. In that case the will for possession lowers the worth of both persons because they have been used not as ends but as means to a transient end.

19 It is obvious that a mother certainly can, and often does, come to love the life of a child that results from a union outside of matrimony. In addition, many couples give birth to children who were “not planned” as said in common parlance. There is something infinitely lovable about any human being, especially the innocence of a human child, who represents a microcosmos of the world we live in. They express our own hope of enjoying more fully a world that exults over life, and treats it with great love and reverence.

20K. Wojtyla, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht, 1979), ch. 2.

21J.F. Crosby, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

22In order to act well morally a person must have acquired good dispositions or inclinations in the will in order to effectively pursue the truth and the good in every moral situation they encounter. This is, of course, an important concept in Aristotle’s system of virtue: good dispositions (*hexeis*) are acquired by doing good, and this practice of virtue perfects our practical judgment or wisdom (*phronesis*). However, the philosopher also recognizes that some people attain good moral results from their actions not only through wisdom and virtue but by way of good fortune. Luck, however, is not due to wisdom because the agent cannot articulate the reasons for their actions nor is it the result acquired good disposition (*hexis*). At times people even succeed in things which they have reasoned poorly about (*Eudemian Ethics* [EE] VIII, 1247b 30-21). In those instances the cause of their good fortune does not derive from luck but from God (cf. A. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, op. cit., p. 70ff.).

23Aristotle, EE VIII, 1248a 26-27: “As God moves everything in the universe, so he moves everything here, by intelligence. For what moves in a manner everything is the divine in us.” here Aristotle distinguishes between the *noûs* or understanding, the divine element located in the human soul, and something superior to that faculty, God Himself.

24Vid. A. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, op. cit., pp. 96-99.

25S. W. Brodie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York, 1991), p. 386.

26EE, 1214b 6-10: “Everyone that has the power to live according to his own choice should set up for himself some object for the good life ... since not to have one’s life organized in view of some end in a mark of much folly.”

27Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio*, I, 16, 43.

28Idem., *De civitate Dei*, Bk. XXII, ch. 30.

29Athanasius, *Oratio contra gentes*, 23 (PG 25, 48 B).

30Idem., *De incarnatione Verbi*, 12 (PG 25, 117 A).

31St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 8 a. 7; cf. Ia-IIIa, q. 77 a. 4; q. 84 a. 2. Vid. J. Pieper, *Über den Begriff der Sünde* (Munich, 1977), pp. 72-84.

32P. Tillich, *Das religiöse Fundament des moralischen Handelns. Schriften zur Ethik und Menschenbild* (Stuttgart, 1965), p. 203: one aspect of sin is estrangement or isolation from God and one’s fellow man.

33Vid. R. Ricoeur, “‘Morale sans peche’ on ‘peche sans moralisme?’” in *Esprit* 64 (1954), p. 304.

34St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIa, q. 34 a. 4.

- 35Ibid., IIa-IIae, q. 34 a. 5; cf. Ia-IIae, q. 60 a. 5; Ia-IIae, q. 109 a. 3; IIa-IIae, q. 26 a. 3.
- 36Cf. J. Schumacher, “L’uomo tra peccato e redenzione” in *Annales Theologici* 2 (1988), p. 47.
- 37St. Thomas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate* (QD), 16, 2.
- 38Ibid., 16, 2 and 17, 2.
- 39Vid. A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1987), ch. XI, “Aquinas on Practical Rationality and Justice,” pp. 183-208, esp. pp. 183-186.
- 40St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 3.
- 41Idem., QD, 17, 3 and 4.
- 42QD, 17, 4.
- 43Cf. R. Garcia de Haro-I. de Celaya, *La Sabiduría Moral Cristiana*, 2nd ed. (Pamplona, 1986), p. 209; vid. St. Thomas, In *Ep. ad Rom.*, ch. 12,1.1.
- 44C. Cardona, *Metafísica de la opción intelectual*, 2nd ed. (Madrid, 1973), p. 136; the translation and emphasis is my own.
- 45St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 58 a. 5: “[when] reason is concerned with the particular, it needs not only universal principles, but also particular ones. So far as the general principles of practice are concerned, a man is rightly disposed by a natural understanding, by which he knows that he should do no evil, and by some normative science. Yet this is not enough in order that a man may reason rightly about particular cases. In fact, it happens sometimes that general principles and conclusions of understanding and science are swept away in the particular case by a passion. Thus to one who is overcome by lust, the object of his desire then seems good, although it is against his general convictions. Consequently, as by the habits of natural understanding and science, a man is rightly disposed with regard to general truths, so, in order that he be rightly disposed with regard to the particular principles of action, namely, their ends, he needs to be perfected by certain habits, whereby it becomes, as it were, connatural to him to judge rightly about an end. This is done by moral virtue, for the virtuous man judges rightly of the end of virtue, because, as Aristotle says, such as a man is, such does the end seem to him (*Ethics*, III, 5. 1114a 32). Consequently right judgment about things to be done, namely prudence, requires that a man has moral virtue.”
- 46Cf. Is. 48, 17: “I, the Lord, your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go. If you would hearken to my commandments, your prosperity would be like a river, and your vindication like the waves of the sea.”
- 47Cf. John Paul II, *General Audience*, August 17, 1983, n. 2 (*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2, p. 256).
- 48M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Günther Neske Verlag, Pfullingen, 1961, 1985, Bk. 2 (tr. from C. Cardona, *Fey Cultura*, reprint of a conference given in Castellaura, Spain, on Sept. 11, 1991 - Servicio de Documentación Montealegre, n. 364, Sept. 9-15, 1991): “The being of the ente consists in the fact of being created by God (omne ens est ens creatum). If, starting from there, the human intellect wishes to know the truth about the ente, the only sure way that remains for that is to zealously reunite and conserve the revealed doctrine whose tradition has been ensured by the Doctors of the Church.”
- 49M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, *op. cit.*, II, V, pp. 133-134.
- 50Ibid., pp. 60-61.
- 51C. Cardona, *Fey Cultura*, *op. cit.*, p. 4; cf. M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, *op. cit.*, II, V, pp. 143-144: “From now on, to be free means that, in place of a certitude in salvation that gives the measure of all truth, man places a type of certitude in which, in virtue of it and in it, he becomes certain of himself... The new freedom is - from the metaphysical point of view - the inauguration of a multiplicity concerning what man can and wishes to consciously place as being necessary and obligatory in the future.”
- 52M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, I, II, p. 90.
- 53*Gaudium et spes*, 16.
- 54John Paul II, Angelus message of March 14, 1982 (*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, V, 1, pp. 860-861).
- 55Ibid.
- 56John Paul II, Enc. Letter, *Centesimus annus*, 41.
- 57Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, 1. V, ch. XXIII: “*et virtutes omnes et honestum illud quod ex iis oritur et in iis haeret per se esse expetendum.*”
- 58John Paul II, Apost. Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 14.

59K. Wojtyła, *En Esprit et En Vérité* (Paris, 1980), pp. 129-130.

60The realization that our conscience is an open book for God does not paralyze man precisely because as a person he determines for himself how he makes use of the soul's freedom. Here we see a parallel with what Aristotle also affirmed, that God is our final cause and thus He is the goal towards which the virtuous man tends. The efficient cause lies in man himself, in the capacity to freely specify and exercise his will as he deems fit. Wojtyła expresses this in the following manner in "En Esprit et En Vérité": *L'homme religieux est convaincu de ce que Dieu le connaît bien plus profondément et le pénètre lui-même aussi bien plus profondément qu'il ne se connaît et ne se pénètre lui-même. Une telle conscience peut, en de certains moments, provoquer un tremblement intérieur; mais, fondamentalement, elle ne peut paralyser l'homme. Car il est convaincu de ce que, comme personne dotée d'autodétermination en ce qui concerne ses actes propres, il a à compter sur le jugement de sa conscience propre pour ce qui touche le bien et le mal moral.*" (p. 130)

61Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 74, 79, 80.

62Ibid., 27.

63K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, op. cit., p. 291, n. 8.

64E. Gilson, *Les méamorphoses de la Cité de Dieu* (Louvain-Paris, 1952), p. 288.

65J. L. Manes, *La Antropologia Teológica de Karol Wojtyła in ScrTh* 11 (1979), pp. 297-352, esp. pp. 335, 344-345; cf. K. Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction* (New York, 1979), p. 132.

66K. Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction*, op. cit., p. 119.

67Cf. J. L. Manes, op. cit., pp. 350-352.

68J. Finnis, "The Foundations of Human Rights" in *Catholic Position Papers*, n. 205 (July 1992), p. 5 (first published in the ICU quarterly, *Cooperation in Education*).

69Michael Novak alerts us that sexual libertinism easily corrupts "natural reason and the normal starting places of faith," and this leads "human reason [to] lose(s) its balance, its purity, and its directness." (M. Novak, "Abandoned in a Toxic Culture" in *Crisis* 10 (1992), pp. 16-17.) Our results concur completely with his affirmation and the traditional teaching of sound moral development. If we continue to allow others to propagate amorality as the standard of normal human conduct we will see how difficult it is to avoid confusion and turmoil in society and our own personal lives. Novak writes, "The intellectual leaders of modern culture assault the very notion of objective truth... They interpret truth as an expression of power alone. As they knock out from Christianity the essential foundation - that there is a truth to be searched for - the whole quest of Christianity becomes senseless. And the name of God - that God is Truth - becomes absurd." (Ibid., p. 16.)

70John Paul II, *Apost. Exhort., Reconciliatio et Poenitentiae*, 14.

