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VERITATIS SPLENDOR TEACHES THE SPLENDOR OF TRUTH

Rev. Russell E. Smith

INTRODUCTION



AUGUST 1, 1987 WAS A HOT SUMMER DAY IN ROME WHEN REDEMPTORISTS AROUND the world gathered to celebrate the twohundredth anniversary of the death of their founder, St. Alphonsus Liguori. In honor of the occasion the Holy Father wrote a letter to the Congregation's Superior General entitled *Spiritus Domini* praising the Founder and recalling St. Alphonsus' many accomplishments. The Pope highlighted the saint's love for the poor and simple, his preaching of popular missions and the study and teaching of moral theology. Concerning this latter point the Holy Father wrote:

[T]he good of the person lies in being in the truth and in doing the truth. This essential bond of truth-good-liberty is largely lost in contemporary culture, and therefore today it is one of the proper tasks of the mission of the church for the salvation of the world to lead people back to seeing this union.

This Apostolic See, for its part, will not fail to make its contribution to this effort by treating the issues of the foundations of moral theology more fully and more deeply in a document *shortly to be released*.¹ [Emphasis added]

Indeed the "essential bond of truth-good-liberty" was to be reasserted, but the release of the document would take more than six years! In fact, most who read this Apostolic Letter to the Redemptorists eventually forgot the promise the Pope made.

The delay of this mysterious document's appearance did not mean that the Holy See was idle, however. In fact, the output of major documents was enormous. Let me share with you just the highlights of what entered the patrimony of the Magisterium between *Spiritus Domini* and *Veritatis splendor*: Remember the commemoration of St. Alphonsus occurred in August, 1987. Just five months prior to that, in March, Pope John Paul's sixth encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* was promulgated. In December of the same year, the seventh encyclical was signed, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. In December, 1990, the Holy Father's eighth encyclical was signed, *Redemptoris missio* to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Vatican II's declaration on missionary activity. Actually, this encyclical got very little press because it was released during the height of the Persian Gulf war, Desert Storm. There would be an hiatus between encyclicals until May, 1999 when *Centesimus annus* was promulgated to celebrate 100 years of "social teaching" commencing with Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*.

Three encyclicals were published between the annunciation and nativity of *Veritatis splendor*. And that's not all. There were three Apostolic Exhortations of substantial length also: *Christifideles laici* (12/88), *Redemptoris custos* (8/89),

and *Pastores dabo vobis* (4/92). One Apostolic Constitution appeared, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* on the Catholic identity of colleges and universities. And there appeared no less than eight Apostolic Letters perhaps the best known of which is *Mulieris dignitatem* (8/88). There were also papal trips to Africa, South America, the Caribbean and the United States.

In 1991, Cardinal Ratzinger attended the Pope John Center's Workshop for Bishops, gave the keynote address and candidly answered the bishops' questions in an "open mike" session. In light of what we just said about the avalanche of documents being issued at that time, the Cardinal stated that it was the Holy Father's intention to publish the encyclical soon, but other work was of a more time-sensitive nature. He said, "the Holy Father cannot publish an encyclical every month, he must give some time to read it and to meditate on it."²

Finally, as the Pope says in the encyclical, it was decided that *Veritatis splendor* should be released after, not before, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which was promulgated during a ceremony in the Vatican on October 11, 1992. This sensitivity to the timing of the two documents is lost on us because of the problems with the English translation of the *Catechism*.

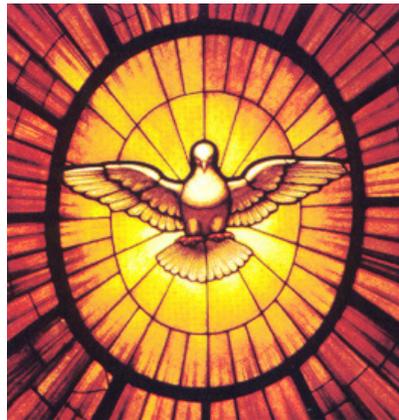
Suspense surrounded the two years prior to the Encyclical's publication. There were rumors that there would be an infallible definition of some type - either about abortion or contraception. There was speculation about whether the document would be about a specific moral problem, or of a more general nature. There were anxieties about whether it would be disciplinary or insipid. Cardinal Ratzinger told the bishops in Dallas that it would not be about specific issues. He said:

Regarding the contents, I can say it's not an encyclical about concrete issues, about concrete topics such as abortion or contraception, or some other things. It is a magisterial expression about the fundamentals of how the Catholic Church can and must be a teacher in moral things. [But] the Holy Father will not be a part of the concrete academic discussions. But the fundamental problems indicated by words like consequentialism, proportionism, and so on must be taken into account.³

During this time of expectation, when bets were being taken about what the name of the encyclical would be, I proposed the title "*Veritatis mora*" - "The Delay of Truth."

To round out these more formal considerations of *Veritatis splendor*, let me go beyond its mere material origin in the Letter to the Redemptorists. And here we will begin to see the distinctiveness and necessity of this encyclical. What occasioned the Encyclical was the need of "clearly setting forth certain aspects of doctrine which are of crucial importance in facing what is certainly a genuine crisis." [VS 5] Pope John Paul then succinctly states the problem:

A new situation has come about within the Christian community itself, which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church's moral teachings. It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions. [VS 4]



It will be the Holy Father's project to correct these erroneous moral teachings by correcting the anthropological and ethical presuppositions which are contrary to Christian faith. He does this by going to the foundations of these errors in the reality of truth-good-liberty (mentioned in the Redemptorist Letter) and their essential inter-relation.

Therefore, we might call the "proximate cause" of the encyclical theological and pastoral dissent from the truth of the Church's teaching, but the real roots of the problem (on the anthropological and ethical level) predate both *Humanae vitae* and Father Charles Curran. The roots of the flower of the "overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine" lie in various disciplines which we will examine shortly. But the point here is that while theological dissent certainly played a role in occasioning the encyclical, there are broader and longer currents of culture itself which are more fundamentally responsible for this and actually would have made the encyclical necessary whether dis-

sent was so dramatic or not. I would venture that what modernism was to dogma in the nineteenth century, dissent is to morals in the twentieth. There is a “modernism of morals” which must claim the pastoral attention of every Catholic. More on this cultural point shortly.

Two final introductory points: First, there is an important connection between the *Catechism* and *Veritatis splendor*. It is this: they are not duplicating work, but are complementary in their function. The Pope puts it this way: “the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ... contains a complete and systematic exposition of Christian moral teaching. The *Catechism* presents the moral life of believers in its fundamental elements and in its many aspects as the life of the “children of God.” So, “while referring back to the *Catechism* ‘as a sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine,’ the Encyclical will limit itself to dealing with *certain fundamental questions regarding the Church’s moral teaching*.”

The specific purpose of the present Encyclical is this: to set forth, with regard to the problems being discussed, the principles of a moral teaching based upon Sacred Scripture and the living Apostolic Tradition, and at the same time to shed light on the presuppositions and consequences of the dissent which that teaching has met. [VS 5]

Second, there is a genuine distinctiveness about this encyclical. In Redemptorist Father Louis Vereecke’s words, morals were the “Cinderella” of the Magisterium inasmuch as the only definitive interventions of the Magisterium in morals was the condemnation of the theses of the laxists by Popes Alexander VII (1655-67) and Innocent XI (1676-89) and the condemnation of the fundamentals of Jansenist morality by Alexander VIII (1689-91).⁴ John Paul II recognizes this uniqueness:

At all times, but particularly in the last two centuries, the Sovereign Pontiffs, whether individually or together with the College of Bishops, have developed and proposed a moral teaching regarding the many different spheres of human life ... contribut[ing] to a better understanding of moral demands in the areas of human sexuality, the family, and social, economic and political life. [VS 4]

[Nevertheless,] [t]his is the first time, in fact, that the Magisterium of the Church has set forth in detail the fundamental elements of this teaching, and presented the principles for the pastoral discernment necessary in practical and cultural situations which are complex and even crucial. [VS 115]

But that is not all. It is said that *Veritatis Splendor’s* clarity is unique among encyclicals since *Aeterni Patris* (1879) of Leo XIII on “the Restoration of Christian Philosophy According to the Mind of St. Thomas Aquinas.” Professor Russell Hittinger of Catholic University says: “More than any other encyclical, *Veritatis* presents the tradition in a complete way. It exposes the interlocking parts of the tradition, and indicates why certain teachings have their respective emphasis and place with the whole.”

There is much that can be said about *Veritatis* and the concept of natural law. In sum, it takes a step backward into the tradition, and thereby takes a great step forward in intellectual rigor and clarity.

This document is not a pamphlet. It does not assume that the reader has an educated sense of how all the parts fit together (which is striking in itself, since it is addressed to the episcopacy). Analysis and argumentation proceed from, and back to, the foundations. At the same time, the synthetic work is properly articulated and differentiated in the light of precisely drawn definitions and distinctions. If we take the century of modern encyclicals according to their logical rather than temporal order, *Veritatis* should be regarded as the first of the encyclicals.⁵



I would put it this way: For the reasons mentioned above by Hittinger, I would say that *Veritatis splendor* is “the first postconciliar document.” Why is this? Because everything from the close of Vatican II to the *Catechism* was either an explanation of or outstanding project of the late Council. The promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1983 and the publication of the *Catechism* in 1992 really completed the outstanding work of Vatican II. *Veritatis splendor*, therefore, this is the first project independent of some need deriving from the Ecumenical Council and it launches the Church back into the larger stream of history and culture. Just scanning the footnotes, one sees a wider use of traditional sources both from the Fathers and from theologians and Popes of the Middle Ages and Renaissance than any other document since the Council.

This further confirms my thesis that the issues addressed by Veritatis splendor have been in the making for hundreds of years - even before the Council of Trent. The encyclical addresses broad shifts in thought and culture which have brought us to the present moment of confusion about the very foundation of morality which we believe derives from the complex interrelation of objective reality, human freedom and natural law, "truth-good-liberty." Let us take some time to get an overview of these shifts and to see how proportionalism came to be.

CONTEMPORARY INTELLECTUAL MILIEU AND ITS HISTORICAL ROOTS⁶

The "Enlightenment" was a period of intellectual history comprised of several "shifts" of thought in various fields of study: theology, philosophy, physics and - for our purposes - ethics. These shifts in perspective were actually reversals of what were previously held "presumptions." We can begin with the theological shift. The Renaissance had put a great deal of emphasis on the human person. The emergent anthropocentrism (given impetus from the Medieval fissioning of faith and reason)⁷ produced an optimistic enthusiasm about human potential and dignity. This is the Renaissance humanism we know from history. We know that the Protestant Reformation was largely a reaction to this. The darker emphases of the Reformers were intended to restate the absolute sovereignty of God over the affairs of this world. This Renaissance optimism eventually led to the reversal of the previously understood relationship of God and humanity. Theretofore, it was the human creature who stood sinful and accused, without excuse before the thrice-Holy God. With the Enlightenment, it is God who comes, hat in hand, to justify Himself before humanity. It is God who had to do the explaining, not ourselves.

Next, there was the "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy with Immanuel Kant. He changed "the definition of truth from 'the conformity of our minds to reality' to 'the conformity of reality to our minds'."⁸ The summit of philosophy was no longer metaphysics, but epistemology. And this meant that science was equated with physics. For Kant, the existence of God was a practical necessity but was theoretically impossible to know. The alleged noumenal reality of God would have no phenomenal aspect, and therefore is forever beyond the reach of knowledge. The reversal in philosophy, then,

consists in this: formerly, philosophy was concerned with being, with reality. With Descartes and Kant, its subject matter is the mind. Metaphysics is replaced by epistemology. Human knowledge establishes the conditions for reality itself. "Truth" is relegated to the "subjective," not the "objective" side of reality.

This reversal becomes more understandable in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of that century, another development of this form of anthropocentrism north of the Alps was the theoretical atheism of the Young Hegelians, most notably Feuerbach. In his thought, theology is reduced to anthropology. The realization that "God" is the name for humanity's idealized self is key to overcoming the alienation inherent in religion. It is in this way that mankind's faith in itself, its power and its future are recovered.

Interestingly, it is John Courtney Murray's contention that atheism has its origin not in rational argument, but in moral outrage.⁹ The existence of an almighty, loving God is incompatible with the poverty, disease and sadness of the world we experience. "If there were an omnipotent God, He would have had to create something better than this." Nietzsche takes this to its nihilistic extreme. Kant plus Feuerbach yields either Marx and Freud on the one hand, or Nietzsche on the other. This corresponds to John Courtney Murray's thesis that there are two types of atheists in the post modern era: the man, of the communist world revolution and the godless man of the theatre (theatre of the absurd).¹⁰

In case you asked yourself whether the Copernican Revolution in philosophy does not presuppose a Copernican Revolution in science, I would say, "logically yes, actually, not necessarily." The real shift is at least symbolized by Charles Darwin. His theory of evolution "showed that the origin and development of [the human race] was simply a phase of cosmic evolution in general, that [humanity's] higher activities could be adequately explained in terms of this evolution, and that at no point was it necessary to introduce the notion of creative activity by a supramundane Being. The fact that there is no necessary connection between the scientific hypothesis of biological evolution and philosophical materialism was indeed clear to some minds at the time. But there were many people who either welcomed or attacked the hypothesis, as the case might be, because they thought that materialism was the natural conclusion to draw from it."¹¹

The “reversal” in science occurred this way: previously, it was believed that the order of the universe was a reflection of an underlying harmonious substrate. It can be said that Pre-Socratic philosophy is essentially (not entirely) cosmology. That is, it is largely an attempt to understand nature. Even the premier evolutionist, Anaximander, posits the existence of an indeterminate primary element more basic than the opposites which come to be and pass away. In other words, classical cosmology presumed “cosmos.” In classical thought, it was humanity that introduced the element of chaos. From its preSocratic beginnings to its Renaissance apex, order and harmony were the presuppositions of philosophy and science.

Darwin marks, at least symbolically, a reversal of this presumption. Evolution progresses by the negative feedback of cruelty and competition for survival among species. Cosmos comes from chaos. The notion of “survival of the fittest” and material evolution, combined with the other reversals in theology and philosophy, set the intellectual stage for the idea that order emerges out of chaos in an evolutionary way. Even physics suffers in this view. In physics, order emerged from amorphous matter and the universe “runs down” by spending its energy in expansion. Today, theories of entropy and randomness dove-tail with Big-Bang and Big-Crunch cosmological theories. Physics is no longer predictive, but only descriptive.¹² The reversal, then, is this: classically, cosmos is primary, chaos is derivative. Now, chaos is primordial and cosmos evolves out of it. In a certain sense and on another level, nature (which is wild) is dominated and replaced by technology as the basis for both knowledge and action. This brings with it the ethics of the “technological imperative”: if we can do it, we should do it.¹³

Anthropology becomes the study of a very sophisticated accident. The goal, point or telos of human existence is not given by scientific research, because in fact, such a telos or meaning of life does not exist. Rather, humanity itself becomes the instrument, the faciendus of its own creative energy. In other words, since there is no inherent meaning in being human, meaning must be imposed by a design of the “project of existence.”

To summarize, then: There have been shifts of focus which characterize “modern” thought as a whole. There has been a move from theology to anthropology; from metaphysics to epistemology; from creation to chaos and predictive to descriptive science, therefore from physics to mathematics.

All this has a profound effect on ethical theory. It has been the “disquieting suggestion” of certain quarters of philosophy that moral language in the contemporary sphere is actually the linguistic rubble left after complete intellectual catastrophe.¹⁴ In its basic structure, ethics is the study and science of getting from where and what we are, to where and what we ought to be, by doing what we ought to do. The catastrophe is what I have just outlined. The reversal in the theological perspective (with its resultant atheism) leaves us without a terminus ad quem. That is, it leaves us bereft of a “final cause” so we must make our own. The reversal in science leaves us without a coherent *terminus a quo* or starting point in nature. There is no real “nature” of the human being, but rather a study of emergence and change with only the broadest descriptive, not predictive outline of order. In fact, the evolutionary order of the development of species runs contrary to the entropy of the universe and its fall into disorder and unpredictability.



“In its basic structure, ethics is the study and science of getting from where and what we are, to where and what we ought to be, by doing what we ought to do.”



Therefore, without a substantive nature and without a rational purpose or end, ethical discourse - which traditionally guides us from the former to the latter - becomes radically meaningless. The ethical endeavor becomes politics in the most jaded sense: accommodation by social contract. This, I suppose, is the “organized stalemate” of the modern pluralistic State. Without a fairly clear point of departure and point of arrival, ethical discourse is a bridge suspended in mid-air coming from nowhere, going nowhere and collapsing into the silence of the underlying abyss.¹⁵

Moral Theory in the Fallout: Proportionalism

The intellectual heirs of the post-Enlightenment moral theory have been numerous. Not all have borne the most handsome fruit. Particularly thorny in this regard is the development and use of proportionalism in Catholic moral theory. We all know that a great deal of

theological energy has been devoted to moral methodology since *Humanae vitae*. The limits of time and topic do not permit an examination of this, but methodology is crucial for moral theology. In fact, any question about a practical moral problem is really a question about the adequacy of method.

The manifold problems of proportionalism are dealt with elsewhere but I would want to say a few words about it that tie in with the reversals that have occurred during the Enlightenment.

First, theories of proportionalism (European and American) are based on an elaboration of the distinction between person and nature. The locus classicus of this in twentieth century theology is in Karl Rahner's essay on "Concupiscence."¹⁶ Here, the late Jesuit theologian describes the personal aspect as that from which free decision about oneself arises. The aspect of nature is understood to include all that is given prior to free decision. Nature is the material about which the personal aspect "decides." It is that which is determined, while the personal aspect is that which determines. Nature is the chaotic, inertial matter given meaning or purpose by our creative intellects. Matter is purely instrumental, not inherently meaningful. The operative "virtue" becomes efficiency. Since there is no inherent meaning, it cannot harbor the possibility of moral absolutes. Nature cannot imply moral absolutes because morality pertains only to reason, or, in this case, "intention." Rahner and others of this school are criticized for denigrating the role of grace. I think that a stronger case can be made for the opinion that it is "nature" which has lost its meaning.

Be that as it may, in moral theology, this can be spelled out as a distinction between the transcendental and categorical, the person and nature, or the distinction between the ontic (pre-moral) and the moral. Acts are the "fitful expression" of one's personal aspect. Categorical acts belong to the realm of the "right" and "wrong," the personal dimension is the domain of "good" and "evil." The moral enterprise in this schema, that is, the judgment of the good or the evil is a determination of whether or not the "fitful expression" is an adequate expression of the inmost self. This is a dualism that severs the connection between good with right, and evil and wrong.

Human acts become instruments by which one brings about a certain state of affairs. Because they are evaluated on the basis of efficiency, not on the basis of

inherent meaning, there may be "virtually exceptionless moral norms," but none can be "actually exceptionless." Logically speaking, doing something that is "wrong" is not the contrary of "good," but is the contrary of "effectively expressive."¹⁷ This is a reversal of what was held in former times.

Stepping back into the secular currents of thought we were discussing earlier, in case we think that Descartes, Hobbes, Darwin, Kant, et al. have no contemporary application, let me make one observation. We Americans are obsessed by two things: sex and death. A recent study made by a leading women's group found that in a given television season (mid-September through March), the major networks alone (not cable channels), make 14,000 references to sex. Another study a few years ago found that by the time the average child receives a driver's license, he or she has witnessed 16,000 deaths on television, apart from the news. If these figures do not constitute an obsession, then obsessions do not exist. The two - sex and death - are related, and deeply. My point is this: another reversal has taken place at the level of everyday life. In the Christian world view, we are conceived by a deliberate act of love, and we die because of some anatomical accident. Today, in the secular world-view, the exact opposite is proposed as normative: we are conceived by accident and we die by a deliberate act ... either of hatred or of a cruel mercy.

When all is said and done, proportionalists think that a human act is relatively insignificant because it is something like a corpse - it is merely a physical occurrence - which must be ensouled by an intention and evaluated (ethically) by its circumstances and consequences. Human acts have no moral character apart from this. Hence, their claim that the end can justify the means, or, evil may be done that good may come of it. This is why they accuse the Christian moral tradition of physicalism and biologism.

VERITATIS SPLENDOR GIVES THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Pope John Paul II responds to the challenges posed to traditional morality by reassembling the coherence of truth-good-liberty understood as the doctrine of natural law. Here again, we can appreciate both the distinctiveness and incisiveness of this encyclical. Professor Hittinger says:

Better than any encyclical since *Rerum novarum*, *Veritatis* adopts a clear and consistent rhetoric of natural law ... Throughout *Veritatis*, the Pope argues that “natural law” does not denote immanent biological or psychological “nature, but rather signifies the divine source of moral norms, imparted by creation, and expressed in the rational structure of human judgment and action. ...”

[O]ur grasp of binding moral norms give “witness” to the truth that in the ordo rerum man is not his own measure. Hence, by distinguishing between the ground of the truth and the act of knowing the truth - or, to employ the encyclical’s language, between the light and what is illuminated - the proper ontological ground of conscience is clarified, and conscience is rescued from being entrapped in psychological and epistemological puzzles.¹⁸

In unpacking this doctrine of natural law, let us begin with the human act. Unlike the proportionalists’ misunderstanding of the human act as something like a cadaver waiting to be animated by intention and circumstances, the Christian analysis of the conditions for determining the goodness or evil of an act are concisely summarized in the *Catechism*:

The morality of human acts depends on the object chosen; the end foreseen or the intention; the circumstances of the action. The object chosen morally specifies the act of the will, according to which reason recognizes and judges itself as conformed or not to the true good. The objective rules of morality express the reasonable order of good and evil, witnessed by the conscience.¹⁹

There are two ways that acts relate to the acting person and both ways are important for morality. The first is an act’s relation to the intellect. It is this relation that determines whether the act is good or evil, because the proper object of the intellect is truth. The judgment of conscience is that function of the practical intellect that judges whether an act is in accord with reason, i.e., how it stands in relation to the order of reality and of one’s ordering of himself to God. There is no real freedom on this score because the acting person is evaluating a proposed act in accord with the objective reality of the moral law. The rational coherence of the act is an objective determination since moral law is not one’s own creation. It is the perennial teaching of moralists that a human act is judged according to “reason informed by

the divine law either naturally, by doctrine or by infusion.” [*De malo* 2, 4 corp.]²⁰

Second, there is the relation of an act to the will. This is where freedom exists. The proper object of the will is the good - real or imagined. One can choose to act in accord with the objective reality of the moral law or one may not. Wrong may seem more attractive than right in a given instance and it is (metaphysically) possible to choose wrong. This is deliberate sin.

True, one can have an erroneous conscience (a problem of the intellectual understanding of the standing of this act in accord with the dictates of morality), and this may diminish or even abolish the culpability of the action, but the action is still wrong.



In other words, moral action has a complex composition. On the one hand, human reason perceives the moral order (the rationality of actions as they relate one to God in the structure of this world and this human nature), an order which one does not create and therefore is not free to disregard. There are some actions which are forbidden even prior to any considerations of intention or circumstances. These are called intrinsically evil and are forbidden by the negative precepts of the natural law. On the other hand, we freely chose by deliberate will to act rationally or not. Hence, St. Augustine’s remark that in morality we are both “servant and free.”

Here the Holy Father’s words find perhaps their deepest meaning in the eloquent section on martyrdom: [VS 87] “Christ reveals, first and foremost, that the frank and open acceptance of truth is the condition for authentic freedom: ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’ (Jn 8:32).”

It is therefore the total action that is free. It is confusing - and erroneous - to say that one’s conscience is free because, as an act of the practical intellect, it makes a judgment about the goodness or evil of the moral object. Conscience is perceptive, not creative of the moral order. “Conscience is an organ, not an oracle.”²¹

Perhaps this is enough said about this aspect - de-

cidedly the most theologically corrective part - of the encyclical, because other salient features deserve comment. Professor Hittinger notes that “the Pope does not merely rehearse the commonplaces of scholastic theology. He improves upon them. For example, his treatment of the Christological meaning of the natural law is superior not only to anything in contemporary Catholic literature on the subject, but also to the work of the neo-Thomists of the pre-conciliar era.”²²

I would put this even more strongly. The Holy Father has not only corrected certain trends in moral thinking; he is not simply restating past teaching. He has basically produced an encyclical answering the question about the *meaning* of life. And while the discovery and appreciation of this meaning is a rational and reasonable undertaking, while its apprehension and pursuit never leads one to contradict reason, it requires more than unaided reason can find. It is a challenge to come to faith in Christ. Because Jesus Christ is at once the Splendor of the Father, He is that luringly attractive Person whom the rich young man engages in his quest for everlasting life.

“What good must I do to inherit everlasting life?” This project of faith poses its question to God - to Christ who reflects the splendor of God. But this question recognizes the need for more than knowledge. It fully engages the human person and so it is moral as well. This embraces the commandments and more - the call to perfection. But the encyclical teaches that morality is not just based on a project of human reason, but on revelation as well - the Bible and the relationship we have with Christ.

With laser-like precision, this insight cuts through all the arid debates about the autonomy of ethics from theology and the no-win questions about whether there is a “distinctively Christian ethics,” as if truth were not one. The theological grounding of morality plainly shows that the person of Jesus adds something to the natural law more than mere intentionality and the sacraments. It adds the wisdom of the theological virtues and particularly of that charity which makes obedience to the moral law joyful and free, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

This is the beauty of the third section of the document. The fullness of Christian moral life is actualized in the lives of the saints. Their lives are embodiments of the moral union of their wills (site of freedom) with that of God - in the myriad circumstances of each unique

life and with what St. Vincent De Paul called the virtue of “creativity to infinity” with which the encyclical concurs.

The unacceptability of “teleological,” “consequentialist,” and “proportionalist” ethical theories, which deny the existence of negative moral norms regarding specific kinds of behaviour, norms which are valid without exception, is confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom, which has always accompanied and continues to accompany the life of the Church even today. [VS 90]

Without exaggeration, this encyclical advances the whole science of moral theology and realizes in its concrete existence the decree of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to renew moral theology by aligning it again with its biblical foundations and with the dynamic necessity to bring forth good actions in charity for the life of the world.

Veritatis splendor returns moral theology to the patrimony of the Church’s theological tradition. Reunited with its biblical roots, undistracted by a neuralgic need to attempt a secularization of morality by divorcing it from the larger questions about the meaning of life and one’s incumbent search - explicit or implicit - for God, animated by the rich young man’s dissatisfaction with just obeying the commandments as exhaustive of moral life, moral theology becomes rejuvenated by a concern for the positive commandments of perfection and love, for the virtues and for holiness of life. Moral theology is reunited with ascetic theology. Moral theology is no longer the study of bad human acts and ascetic theology the study of virtue. Ascetic theology is no longer a second semester elective, it is the soul of moral theology.

In the first section of *Veritatis splendor* the rich young man is commended for following the commandments and is told that perfection would involve total self-giving: “Go sell what you have and come follow me.” In the final chapter of the encyclical the Holy Father describes this road of perfection in this way: “The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; he lives it fully in the total gift of Himself and calls His disciples to share His freedom.” [VS 85]

Jesus reveals by his whole life, and not only by his words, that freedom is acquired in love, that is, in the gift of self ... Contemplation of Jesus

crucified is thus the highroad which the Church must tread every day if she wishes to understand the full meaning of freedom: the gift of self in service to God and one's brethren. [87]

Veritatis splendor is a source of inspiration for the entire Church. It is addressed to the chief pastors, the bishops and, through them, is a message for all of us. It is a call for unity in the whole Church as we face the daunting challenges of elements totally inimical to the purposes and will of God. Here we find food for theological reflection, spiritual reading and renewal of pastoral zeal. It is not just a call for standing at attention, it gives us real inspiration to conduct our own lives according to the highest standards of Christ, not out of fear, but out of love.

Veritatis splendor is a beautiful evangelical document. With it, in union with the Pope and the bishops, we can call non Christians to Christ, and Catholics to a deeper discipleship. In fact, the "living example" of Catholics will be the most appealing call to Christ:

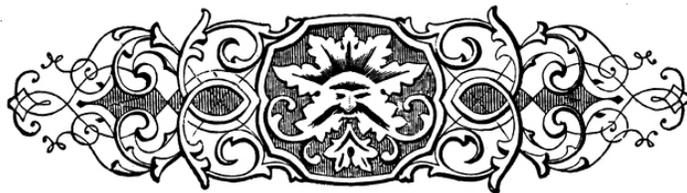
[T]he life of holiness which is resplendent in so many members of the People of God, humble and often unseen, constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and

the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord's law, even in the most difficult situations. [VS 107]

The call to evangelization is addressed especially to us priests. All of us priests - secular, religious and monastic - are all missionaries. And the threshold of the missionary field is the evangelization of our own heart. Our explicit goal must be holiness of life, with all that involves in terms of penance, prayer and meditation, as well as the other good works of the ministry. It is a call for us to be "confessors" in the full, traditional sense of that term: those who openly profess faith in Christ in integrity of life, convinced of the truth that:

No absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life. [VS 120]

The life of the saints, and particularly that of the martyrs reveal total espousal of this discipleship and perfection. Let us conclude then, with the words of the prayer over the gifts in the Mass for a Martyr in Paschaltide, "Lord, we celebrate the death of your holy martyrs. May we offer the sacrifice which gives all martyrdom its meaning."



NOTES

1AAS 79 (1987), 1374 (English trans. The Pope Speaks).

2 "Postscript: Dialogue with Cardinal Ratzinger," *Catholic Conscience: Foundation and Formation. Proceedings of the Tenth Bishops' Workshop*, Russell E. Smith, ed. (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1991), 285.

3Ibid., 286.

4Louis Vereecke, C.Ss.R., "Magistere et morale selon *Veritatis splendor*," *Studia Moralia* 31 (1993), 391

5Russell Hittinger, "The Splendor of Truth: A Forum," *First Thing*: 39 (Jan. 1994), 17.

6This section of the paper is essentially a reprint of Russell E. Smith "Medical Ethics: An Offspring of the Church," *Dolentium Hominum*, vol. 15, no. 3 (Dec. 1990), 39-46.

7John Courtney Murray, S.J., *The Problem of God* (Yale University Press, 1964), 90.

8Benedict Ashley, O.P., *Theologies of the Body: Humanistic and Christian* (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1985), 641.

9Murray, op. cit., 101.

10Ibid., 104-110.

11Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Modern Philosophy: Schopenhauer to Nietzsche*, vol. 7, part 2 (New York: Image Books, 1963), 127-28.

12Cf. Ashley, op. cit., 38-42 and 49, note 51.

13For an interesting elaboration of this, see Germain Kopaczynski, OFM Conv., “Feminism, Natural Law and Abortion,” *Ethics and Medics*, Nov. 1994, vol. 19, no. 11, 3-4.

14Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981).

15Ibid., 52-59.

16Karl Rahner, S.J., “The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia,” *Theological Investigations, vol. 1: God, Christ, Mary and Grace* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd., 1961). See especially note 2, pp. 362-63. See also the equally foundational “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace” in the same volume, pp. 297-317. (This volume is a translation of *Schriften Zur Theologie*, I, published by Verlagsanstalt Benziger & Co., A.G., Einsiedeln-Zurich-Koln, 1954).

17Russell E. Smith, *The Theology of Sin and its Distinction in the United States from 1965 to 1985*, Doctoral dissertation, Accademia Alfonsiana (Rome, 1987), 138-39, 356.

18Hittinger, op. cit., 18.

19 On this point the author is indebted to Father Brian Mullady’s article “Both Servant and Free” in *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars’ Newsletter*, Dec. 1993, 20.

20Ibid., 23.

21Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Bishops, Theologians and Morality,” *Moral Theology Today: Certitudes and Doubts* (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1984), 14. Cf. R. Spaemann, *Moralische Grundbegriffe*, Munchen, 1982.

22Hittinger, op. cit., 18.