
On the Encyclical “The Splendor of the Truth”

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On October 5, 1993, the Vatican released a long, complex new teaching document by Pope John Paul II—an encyclical called *Veritatis Splendor* (“The Splendor of the Truth”). Its subject is “certain fundamental questions of the Church’s moral teaching.”

Why did Pope John Paul consider this encyclical necessary? Because today, *Veritatis Splendor* explains, it is no longer “a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine.” This problem exists “even in seminaries and in faculties of theology.”

The nature of the dissent to which the encyclical is responding needs to be understood clearly.

The Church has always taught that some kinds of acts are intrinsically evil and may never be chosen and deliberately performed, no matter what the circumstances or the intentions of particular individuals might be. For instance: one should never choose to kill an innocent person or to engage in adultery.

In the last three decades, many moral theologians denied this teaching about intrinsically evil acts. Dissent became especially public and intense after the publication in 1968 of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI’s encyclical restating Catholic teaching on contraception; but it has not been limited to that issue.

Dissenting theologians now claim that there are exceptions to the moral norms forbidding such things as adultery, fornication, masturbation, abortion, and sexual intimacy with a new partner after the breakdown of a sacramental marriage. It is not that they advocate these things; but they argue that there are, or can be, situations that allow people to choose and do them.

Pope John Paul’s encyclical deals at length with these dissenting views, and does so in a variety of ways. The document is divided into three chapters. We shall look at the second and third later in this booklet. Here we consider the first chapter.

A reflection on the rich young man

It is mainly a reflection on the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man in chapter 19 of St. Matthew’s gospel. That account, the Pope says, is “a useful guide for listening once more in a lively and direct way to [Jesus’] moral teaching” (no. 6).

It may sound as if Pope John Paul were here engaging merely in pious exhortation—giving a kind of homily, as it were. In fact, he has something else in view, something with specific bearing on the problem of theological dissent.

In the fallen human condition, it is common for people, including Christians, to view negative moral norms—prohibitions against choosing and acting in certain ways—as burdensome impositions standing in the way of the happiness and success they want out of life.

This attitude, pervasive in contemporary culture, lends powerful practical support to the views of dissenting moral theologians, whose message naturally appeals to many people.

Thus it is impossible, practically speaking, to overcome dissenting views without first overcoming the attitude of moral minimalism (do as little as necessary to get by) and replacing it with wholehearted

commitment to the pursuit of holiness. This is what the Pope sets out to encourage in chapter one of *Veritatis Splendor*.

Recall the gospel story. A rich young man comes to Jesus and asks him, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” In this young man, Pope John Paul says, “we can recognize every person who . . . approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality” (no. 7).

The first stage in Jesus’ answer to the young man’s question is this: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” “Which ones?” asks the young man. Jesus replies by giving special emphasis to those bearing upon our relationships with other human beings: the command to honor father and mother and the prohibitions of killing, of adultery, and so on.

Commenting on this, Pope John Paul observes that the commandments represent “the basic condition for love of neighbor” and are “the first necessary step on the journey towards freedom.” He quotes St. Augustine to explain that:

The beginning of freedom is to be free from crimes . . . such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege, and so forth. When once one is without these crimes (and every Christian should be without them), one begins to lift up one’s head towards freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom.

Only the beginning of freedom. . . . What comes next? To answer that question, *Veritatis Splendor* turns to the Sermon on the Mount, described by St. Augustine as “the complete plan of Christian life.”

In his moral teaching as it is summed up in the Beatitudes and the rest of the sermon, Jesus does not abolish the commandments but brings them to fulfillment while also pointing beyond them. Pope John Paul says: “Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love” (no. 15).

And now the Pope makes one of the most important points in the entire encyclical. The “journey towards perfection” is not intended for spiritual elite; it is intended for absolutely all Christians—it is the Christian life. Repudiating moral minimalism and the attitude that God’s law is “a burden . . . a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom,” he writes:

This vocation to perfect love is not restricted to a small group of individuals. The invitation, “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor,” and the promise “you will have treasure in heaven,” are meant for everyone, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, “Come, follow me,” is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God (no. 18).

That is to say: “The way and at the same time the content of this perfection consist in the following of Jesus. . . . Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality” (no. 19).

This is a breakthrough. In these passages Pope John Paul moves far beyond the tendency, too often present in moral teaching in the past, to present morality in legalistic terms and set it apart from the rest of Christian life. Rather, he teaches, doing good and avoiding evil is an integral part of the one, unified process that is Christian life: the following of Jesus Christ.

The implications for morality itself are clear. Pope John Paul puts it like this:

Jesus’ way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him. It is the “new” commandment. . . .” (no. 20).

But how can sinful, weak human beings live this way? Pope John Paul answers that question too. We are not alone in our efforts to follow Christ. “To imitate and live out the love of Christ is not possible for man by his own strength alone. He becomes capable of this love only by virtue of a gift received. . . . Christ’s gift is his Spirit, whose first ‘fruit’ is charity” (no. 22).

Veritatis Splendor makes many other important points in chapters two and three. None, however, is more important than this.

The answer to minimalism

Christian morality consists essentially in following Jesus on the way to holiness and heavenly fulfillment. This is a “way” to which Jesus calls us all, empowering us to make the journey by the gift of his Spirit. That, finally, is the conclusive solution to the moral minimalism that lends so much plausibility to theoretical and practical dissent.

Pope John Paul II, in *Veritatis Splendor*, says very clearly what it is about. The “central theme . . . restated with the authority of the successor of Peter” is that there are “intrinsically evil acts”—acts that never may be chosen and performed.

Citing the teaching of Vatican Council II and other popes, he offers some examples. His non-exhaustive list includes things like homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, voluntary suicide, mutilation, physical and mental torture, slavery, prostitution, and contraception.

There is good reason why John Paul II should be making this point. Some influential Catholic moral theologians now deny that there can be any intrinsically evil acts, and their thinking has filtered down into theological faculties, seminaries, and pastoral practice.

It is not just that they dissent from Church teaching on this point or that. Rather, they hold moral theories that rule out the possibility of absolutely excluding any particular kind of action.

Veritatis Splendor names and examines two of these theories—consequentialism and proportionalism. (It also takes up a certain version of “fundamental option” theory, which does not deny that there are intrinsically evil acts, but gets around them in practice by treating them as if they were something less than truly mortal sins—a position rejected by Pope John Paul and the tradition of the Church.)

The differences between consequentialism and proportionalism are very real and of great importance to specialists in the field. Nevertheless, they are alike in rejecting the idea that there are certain kinds of acts that, unless repented, always exclude people who freely commit them from God’s kingdom.

There are several reasons why these theories enjoy a certain plausibility today.

They are a reaction against the unacceptable legalism that prevailed in much Catholic moral thinking of the not-so-distant past; they use as a model for moral reasoning the method successfully used in dealing with non-moral technical and economic issues, where efficiency is what counts; they claim (incorrectly) to be developing approaches used by classical Catholic moralists; and they likewise claim to be doing what reasonable people agree ought to be done when moral decisions must be made—namely, take intentions and relevant circumstances fully into account.

Some acts are always wrong

Nevertheless, *Veritatis Splendor* says firmly that these theories are wrong. Even when done with the good intention of achieving some important good or avoiding some great evil, Pope John Paul teaches, some kinds of acts are always wrong because their object conflicts with the good of the human person and cannot be ordered to the ultimate end, God.

Good intentions do not settle the matter, the Pope explains:

The reason why a good intention is not itself sufficient, but a correct choice of actions is also needed, is that the human act depends on its object, whether that object is capable or not of being ordered to God, to “the One who alone is good”, and thus brings about the perfection of the person. An act therefore is good if its object is in conformity with the good of the person with respect for the goods morally relevant for him (no. 78).

And elsewhere Pope John Paul sums up his argument this way: “Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature ‘incapable of being ordered’ to God because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image” (no. 80).

While some prominent dissenting moral theologians have said the encyclical oversimplifies or even misstates the views held by themselves and their associates, its basic line of argument against dissent from the Church’s moral teaching is devastatingly sound.

In essence, it is this. Scriptural passages like chapter 6, verses 9 and 10 in St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians mean exactly what they say—unless they repent, people who do certain kinds of acts (St. Paul speaks here, among other things, of adultery and sexual perversion) will not inherit the kingdom.

Throughout *Veritatis Splendor* the Pope repeatedly makes the point that the moral norms disputed and rejected by dissenting theologians, as well as the encyclical’s own central teachings, pertain to divine revelation.

Thus, he says that “Jesus’ way of acting and his words, his deeds, and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life” (no. 20). He affirms that the gospel is “the source of all saving truth and moral teaching.” In treating Jesus’ teaching on the Ten Commandments, he makes the remarkable assertion: “Jesus himself reaffirms that these prohibitions allow no exceptions: ‘If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. . . . You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery’” (no. 52).

No doubt dissenting moralists and their friends in Scripture studies will attempt to sidestep this argument by the Pope. In effect, they will say that Old and New Testament moral prohibitions like these are not absolute, as they seem.

But it is impossible to ignore this plain fact: until some theologians fairly recently began to deny that there are intrinsically evil acts, no Christian or Jew imagined that “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery” mean that killing the innocent and committing adultery are permitted to those who have a “proportionate reason” for doing these things or who consider them a “lesser evil” than something else they might choose.

Suppose, though, that the dissenters were right? Suppose this were what the words of Scripture signify? What would that mean?

It would mean, quite simply, that throughout the centuries until our own day the moral truth that God meant to communicate had been seriously, radically misunderstood by those to whom he tried to communicate it. And, if that were the case, then God would have communicated ineffectively.

Moreover, it would mean that the whole body of Christian believers had been mistaken about the meaning of the commandments from Pentecost until the very recent past. But it is a matter of faith, taught by Vatican Council II and reaffirmed by Pope John Paul in *Veritatis Splendor*, that the Holy Spirit’s presence in the Church rules that out.

The dissenters are mistaken. Their views are incompatible with Christian faith.

In the wake of *Veritatis Splendor*, dissenting Catholic moral theologians basically face three options. They can admit that they were mistaken; they can admit that they do not believe God’s word; or they can argue that the pope, whom Catholics traditionally call and believe to be the Vicar of Christ, is guilty of grossly misinterpreting Sacred Scripture.

No doubt most, in one way or another, will choose the third option.

No doubt, too, faithful Catholics who understand the issues at stake in this debate will make their choice in favor of Catholic tradition and its belief, grounded in faith, that acts such as killing the innocent and adultery are always wrong. As Pope John Paul says in *Veritatis Splendor*, addressing the bishops of the world and, through them, Catholics everywhere:

Each of us can see the seriousness of what is involved, not only for individuals but also for the whole of society, with the reaffirmation of the universality and immutability of the moral commandments, particularly those which prohibit always and without exception intrinsically evil acts.

A reflection on martyrdom

The third and last chapter of Pope John Paul II's encyclical carries the heading "moral good for the life of the Church and the world."

Here the Pope offers several reflections illustrating and supporting the encyclical's central theme—that there are intrinsically evil acts and absolute moral norms forbidding them in all circumstances—and underlining its relevance in both places, the Church and the secular society. One of these reflections concerns martyrdom.

At first glance, martyrdom may seem like a strange subject for consideration in an encyclical on morals. But as Pope John Paul shows, it belongs here.

His point is that, by the reverence with which the Church regards martyrs who have surrendered their lives rather than compromise moral truth, she gives compelling testimony to her faith in the same teaching that lies at the heart of *Veritatis Splendor*.

The unacceptability of ethical theories denying that there are specific moral norms "valid without exception," Pope John Paul says, is "confirmed in a particularly eloquent way" by martyrdom and by the Church's response to it.

The encyclical cites several examples: Susanna in the Old Testament, prepared to die rather than commit adultery; John the Baptist, who gave up his life for telling Herod the truth about God's law regarding marriage; and other figures from the New Testament, including even Jesus himself.

It would be easy to add many more examples to such a list, including some drawn from modern times: for instance, the Uganda martyrs, who preferred death to homosexual behavior, and St. Maria Goretti, who died rather than surrender to sexual assault.

What is the point of discussing martyrs and martyrdom in the context of a discussion of intrinsically evil acts and exceptionless moral norms? Pope John Paul explains:

The Church proposes the example of numerous saints who bore witness to and defended moral truth even to the point of enduring martyrdom, or who preferred death to a single mortal sin.

In raising them to the honor of the altars, the Church has canonized their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances, and the refusal to betray those commandments, even for the sake of saving one's own life (no. 91).

In other words, by canonizing martyrs who gave their lives rather than violate moral norms that allow of no exception, the Church testifies clearly and irrevocably to her faith that there are indeed intrinsically evil acts and that no one may choose such an act even to save his or her life.

Another consideration put forward by Pope John Paul in this third chapter of the encyclical is of a broadly “political” nature. It is: adherence to the principle that there are intrinsically evil acts and absolute moral norms is necessary to the defense of human rights.

In our times, a great deal has been said and written about human rights; and yet human rights have repeatedly been violated, often on a massive scale. (Think of the Holocaust. Think of legal abortion.) Why is that?

Veritatis Splendor points to the underlying explanation for this apparent contradiction. The idea of “the inviolable personal dignity of every human being” has no real force apart from acceptance of the principle that acts which violate this dignity are intrinsically evil and the moral norms that forbid those acts are absolute—that is, exceptionless.

Lacking that, we might say, human dignity and human rights are “inviolable” only up to the point at which it becomes convenient for somebody to violate them, out of self-interest or, possibly, in the name of bringing about some greater good or lesser evil.

Pope John Paul explains:

The fundamental moral rules of social life thus entail specific demands to which both public authorities and citizens are required to pay heed.

Even though intentions may sometimes be good, and circumstances frequently difficult, civil authorities and particular individuals never have authority to violate the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.

In the end, only a morality which acknowledges certain norms as valid always and for everyone, with no exception, can guarantee the ethical foundation of social coexistence, both on the national and international levels (no. 97).

The violation of inviolable human rights is particularly common—or at least particularly obvious—under totalitarian regimes. But it is not limited to them. In words that deserve to be heeded in the United States and other liberal democracies of the West, the Pope writes:

Today, when many countries have won the fall of ideologies which bound politics to a totalitarian conception of the world—Marxism being the foremost of these—there is no less grave a danger that the fundamental rights of the human person will be denied. . . .

This is the risk of an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism, which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life, and on a deeper level make the acknowledgment of truth impossible. . . . “As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism” (no. 101).

A third consideration advanced by Pope John Paul in this final chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* is that, contrary to those who say otherwise, living Christian moral life is a practical possibility for everyone.

It is extremely important to make this point just now when it is frequently denied, not just in secular circles but even by some in the Church.

No argument more effectively undermines determination to try to live the Christian life than the assertion that Christian morality—including absolute, exceptionless norms that forbid certain acts—sets an unrealistically high standard that only a handful of people are able to realize in practice. The argument is particularly devastating when it is made in the name of “pastoral sensitivity” and concern for the welfare of souls.

“Even in the most difficult situations,” Pope John Paul writes, “man must respect the norm of morality so that he can be obedient to God’s holy commandment and consistent with his own dignity as a person” (no. 102).

Sometimes, to be sure, living by moral truth can be very difficult; it may require “uncommon sacrifices . . . it can even involve martyrdom.” But the difficulty more often arises from within our divided selves. To illustrate, the Pope quotes St. Paul’s famous words in his letter to the Romans: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want.”

Still, with God’s help, it is possible to live by the standard of moral truth. Quoting from an address on responsible parenthood that he delivered in 1984, Pope John Paul says:

It would be a very serious error to conclude . . . that the Church’s teaching is essentially only an “ideal” which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated to the so-called concrete possibilities of man. . . .

But what are the “concrete possibilities of man?” And which man are we speaking of? Of man dominated by lust or of man redeemed by Christ? This is what is at stake: the reality of Christ’s redemption.

Christ has redeemed us! This means that he has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the domination of concupiscence. And if redeemed man still sins, this is not due to an imperfection of Christ’s redemptive act, but to man’s will not to avail himself of the grace which flows from that act (no. 103).

As that suggests, the new encyclical on moral principles is a realistic document. Realistic, that is, for people for whom sin, grace, and redemption, along with freedom and moral truth, are among the splendid realities of human life. In *Veritatis Splendor* Pope John Paul has done a great deal to bring these realities into focus once again for Catholics whose vision of them had been clouded in recent years by the smog of dissent within the Church.