Reflections on ‘Veritatis Splendor’

Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* (Aug. 6, 1993) is one of the most significant moral statements by the Holy See in this century. It is not a typical encyclical on moral matters.

Unlike others that have addressed different spheres of the moral life (e.g., sexuality, the family, and social, economic and political life), this one reflects on the foundations of moral theology. That is to say, it deals with principles and methods that guide our choosing what is genuinely good in the context of daily life. The encyclical, therefore, is more technical and theoretical than it is practical.

**Cultural backdrop**

The encyclical has been issued against the backdrop of a culture marked by the spirit of relativism and the exaggerated autonomy of individualism. In this context, individuals wish to make decisions about what is good and what is evil largely on their own and in light of what feels good and satisfies personal needs. Respect for morality gets reduced to respect for a particular morality, but not for any sense of or commitment to universal truth.

Freedom taken to its extreme becomes an absolute. Then it becomes its own source of values independent of objective truth.

Against this background we can appreciate the concern of the encyclical to keep the exercise of human freedom united to truth. The encyclical affirms the notion of objective truth as the ground for absolute, universal, immutable moral imperatives. In addition, it also asserts an objective morality rooted in God’s law and human nature, and it calls us to seek out what God wants from each of us as that can be known in Revelation, natural law, and through the teaching of the magisterium.

The encyclical is addressed specifically to the bishops, who share with the Pope the responsibility to safeguard authentic teaching of the Church. Thus, it sets forth fundamental truths of Catholic moral doctrine that are based upon sacred Scripture and the living apostolic Tradition. In particular, it identifies those truths of morality that are at risk of being distorted or denied not only in academic debates among moral theologians but also in popular religious beliefs and practices.

Reading the encyclical demands special moral theological competence. The technical nature of the document and the issues at stake make the encyclical less accessible to those not trained in moral theology and to those who are not familiar with the various debates among academic theologians. My aim here is to interpret some of its key themes so as to affirm again those moral doctrines of the Church that are being preserved, defended and explained in the encyclical and to which we give religious assent.

The encyclical is divided into three parts.

**Intrinsic connection**

The first part is a biblical meditation on the dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22). It brings out the intrinsic connection between faith and morality, which is the foundation for all that follows.

The second part is the longest and is more doctrinal in nature. It makes a critical assessment of certain trends in moral theology.

The third part is pastoral in nature and is concerned with the relevance of Catholic moral teaching for life in the Church and in the world. It underscores the responsibility of the bishops to preserve the authentic teaching of the Church, and it defines the role of the moral theologian in relation to the magisterium.

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**PART I: THE GOSPEL MEDITATION ON MATTHEW 19:16-22**

The core teaching of the first part of the encyclical is the intrinsic link of faith and morality. This is the key to the whole teaching of the encyclical. Faith involves more than an intellectual assent to certain truths. It also entails morality.

Faith calls us to a way of life that includes, and brings to fulfillment, the law of the Covenant and the New Covenant in Christ. In the light of faith, human moral action is always subject to what God requires. Thus, the path to eternal life is intrinsically linked to right moral living.

In Dostoyevsky’s classic, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan expresses the attitude that if God does not exist, then everything is permissible. The encyclical affirms, however, that God does exist. Precisely for this reason, not everything is permissible. Where God’s presence is denied, there is no fixed point of reference for ultimate significance to life or for a source of objective meaning, truth and goodness. God is the guarantee of moral truth and goodness.

The fundamental presupposition of morality is our conviction about the good. The good is the source and goal of all moral striving. The basic doctrine of the encyclical is that God is the Absolute Good, the fixed point of reference for morality. Only God constitutes the unshakable foundation and essential condition of morality since God, the Absolute Good in whose image we are made, is the origin and goal of human striving.

To establish anything other than God as the center of truth, goodness or value is idolatrous. To ask about the good and to seek the good ultimately means to turn toward God. Any form of goodness that attracts us and obliges us...
does so only because it ultimately derives from the prior goodness of God which it reflects or mediates. Thus, our moral sense is rooted in and fulfilled in our religious sense. We do not do justice to our moral experience and our moral perspective without referring in some way to God as the source and goal of it all.

This basic conviction that God is the Absolute Good gives us a reason for being moral. We, who are made in the image of God, are already caught up in the goodness of God and so must reflect that goodness in the world. We are moral because God is good. From this fundamental doctrine about the goodness of God as the source of objective morality, we can derive a normative statement about the moral life: Human moral striving ought to be responsive to God and governed by the goodness of God.

Moral, then, cannot be authorized by social convention, rational self-interest or the desire for self-fulfillment. God authorizes and requires morality. As a result, the moral life is a response to God. Actions are wrong not because they cause harm to self or others, or because they violate convention. Actions are wrong because they are not properly responsive to what God requires.

**An intrinsic link**

Who we are and what we must do is made clear in the revelation of God. Divine revelation contains specific and determined moral content. What God requires of us can be discovered in the whole of the Law, particularly in the commandments of the Covenant, in the New Covenant, pre-eminently in Jesus, and in the law written in a definitive way upon the human heart — the natural law.

By affirming that God is good and that all morality is striving to reflect that goodness, we also affirm an intrinsic link between eternal life (participating in the very life of God) and living morally — by obeying the commandments, by following Christ according to the loving disposition of the beatitudes and the twofold commandment of the love of God and neighbor, and by adhering to the natural law from which we learn the essential duties and fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person.

Jesus the Christ, above all, is the one who fully reveals not only the mystery of God but also the mystery of what it means to be human. If we want to know what life means, if we want to understand ourselves thoroughly, and if we want to distinguish good from evil, we turn to Jesus. We turn not only to His teachings and commandments but to His very person, following along the path of love and partaking of His life and destiny. That is to say, we become a disciple.

Being a disciple, or following Christ, is the foundation of Christian morality. The way of Jesus is the moral rule of the Christian life. By becoming a disciple of Jesus, the Incarnate Wisdom of God, we become a disciple of God, Absolute Goodness.

Jesus brings God’s commandments to fulfillment by interiorizing their demands and by bringing out their fullest meaning. In this way, He teaches the truth about what is good and what is evil, and He shows what life looks like when one lives out of the disposition of a loving heart truly obedient to God’s will. We in turn do this most completely when we love others out of love for God.

**For all time**

The relevance of Christ for all time is shown forth in His body, the Church. The Church offers today the answer to our questions about life and about good and evil, an answer which comes from the truth about Jesus. So as to remain vigilant over the right conduct of Christians, the Church preserves and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, faithfully interprets and correctly applies in different times and places the moral teachings and commandments that Jesus entrusted to the apostles. This task of authentically interpreting and applying the teachings and commandments of Jesus is entrusted to the magisterium (the Pope and the bishops), whose teachings are due the religious assent of soul from all the faithful.

**PART II: THE CRITICAL DISCERNMENT OF TRENDS IN MORAL THEOLOGY**

This second part is written in quite different language than Part I. It takes us from the realm of biblical meditation to the territory of moral philosophy. The primary focus is to discriminate between positive and negative trends in moral theology so as to treat certain fundamental truths of moral doctrine that risk being distorted or denied. It asserts these truths within the context of several complex themes.

**1. Freedom**

Freedom is so central to the moral
2. The natural law

In exercising our freedom in this journey toward God, we must be able to distinguish good from evil. We are able to make such a discernment through reason informed by faith. Faith draws on the revelation given to the Chosen People and continuing with the New Covenant in Jesus and through the Church’s teaching that preserves revelation for each age. Reason, the reflection of divine truth within us, works through natural law.

Natural law is not to be taken as a codified system of law. Rather, it is the human way of participating in the eternal law of God. Through natural law we share in divine providence. That is, natural law is our way of sharing in the eternal, objective, universal law by which God governs all things to their true end.

The precepts of natural law are essentially subordinate to divine wisdom. Natural law is natural in that it is constitutive of every person’s capacity to discover moral truth and to be inclined toward right action and a good end. Natural law is law in that it has authority to impose duties, to confer rights, and to oblige us to do what is good and to avoid evil.

The proper function of natural law respects human freedom and the body-soul unity of the human person. Dualistic philosophies have had an influence on the whole history of Christian thought. Dualism has permeated the atmosphere of moral theology to sustain a split between body and soul and to corrupt the true meaning of natural law. The dualism that makes physical nature extrinsic to the person only serves to preclude it from having any meaning or value that would provide rational indications of the moral order.

It must be affirmed that the person is one, a unity of body and soul. The body is not an accessory, or something to house our subjectivity. Our bodies are essential to our being integrated persons. As a composite unity, the body and soul rise and fall together. What concerns the body inevitably concerns the whole person. Just as the soul informs the body, so the body gives expression to the soul.

Natural law reflects, in its truest sense, the person as a unified totality. To act in accord with the inherent tendencies of being a body-soul unity is to act in accord with our God-given nature. This is the same as obeying the natural law. Therefore, natural law cannot be thought of as a set of norms on the biological level. It pertains to the rational order found in the dignity proper to the person as a unified whole, and not simply as the inclinations of the physical nature of the person.

Since natural law is in the rational nature of the person, it is found in all beings endowed with reason. The dignity of the person that natural law expresses can be expressed differently over time and in different cultures. However, human nature itself and the moral order, which rational reflection on human nature (the natural law) discovers, transcends time and culture. This is what it means to affirm that the natural law upholds an objective moral order which is not fleeting or capricious.

As a result, the precepts of natural law, which are laws derived from this moral order through the light of reason, possess a universal and permanent character. They disclose the rights and duties of all persons, and their authority obliges all peoples for all times.

The universality and permanent character of human nature and natural law yield positive precepts that order humans to do certain things and to acquire certain dispositions, such as to worship God, to preserve life, to develop the riches of the material world, to honor our parents, to seek the truth, to avoid evil and to do good. We can put no limit to the ways of satisfying these positive precepts.

The negative precepts of natural law are also universally valid. They set the bottom limit of what goes against the dignity of the person. These bottom limits are called “intrinsic evils” or “negative moral absolutes.” While we always will face the challenge of finding the best way to formulate universal norms in light of different cultural contexts, we are still able to recognize some of them to be valid in every time and place: do not torture; do not rape; do not force people to live in subhuman
The true dignity of conscience is respected when we make an honest effort to search for the truth and then judge in a way that reflects the truth about the good. This search for and continual conversion to the true and the good is the lifelong process of forming conscience. This informing takes place in community by appealing to appropriate sources of moral wisdom. For the Catholic, the teaching of the magisterium is a privileged source.

For conscience to act responsibly in making a moral judgment, it needs to know the objective truth pertaining to the decision at stake. In no way can we say that our freedom is offended by this obligation to search for truth and to judge in its light, since our minds are not free to deny what is true. Truth has a compelling force on conscience.

One avenue to truth is through consulting authority, particularly magisterial authority. The judgment of conscience properly formed takes seriously that we are limited in our personal experience and vision of what is true and good. The official teaching of the magisterium can open us to a broader experience and vision of the good.

The encyclical affirms the teaching of the council on the relation of conscience to magisterial authority: "In forming their consciences the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church" (no. 64; cf. Dignitatis Humanae, no. 14). This tells us that we cannot ignore or minimize the teaching of the Church in the formation of conscience.

Turning to the teaching of the Church does not pit personal conscience against magisterial teaching as though conscience were an authority in itself. Rather, conscience depends on the teaching of the magisterium in its quest for truth and in an effort to be properly informed. The teaching of the magisterium serves conscience by helping it not to be deceived by false goods nor to be distracted from the true good.

The moral conscience appeals to the authority of the Church in order to know the truth that one must do in love. The proper judgment of conscience in light of the authority of the Church depends on the exercise of the virtue of docility, an attitude of openness of mind and a readiness of will to assimilate the teaching and to live by it out of personal conviction.

A serious effort to assimilate the teaching and to make it one’s own is necessary if the moral backbone of the judgment of conscience is going to remain inside the person. Only in this way will the judgment of what to do arise from an internalized and personalized commitment to the truth.

We offend the dignity of conscience when we fail to strive out of love to appropriate what is true and good and then to act accordingly. When we are not open to the truth in love, we are not being responsible in our obligation to inform and to follow conscience. Ultimately, the final judgment of conscience must be enlightened by the objective norm of morality, the goodness of God.

4. Fundamental option and sin

Freedom is central to our understanding of sin. Following upon the body-soul unity of the person, we can understand freedom as a single reality that gets expressed in two different, though related, spheres.

One is to express freedom in everyday moral actions by choosing to do this or that from among a number of options. The other sphere of freedom is the person’s self-commitment as a whole. This is what we mean by fundamental freedom. It is the freedom to make something of oneself, to be good or bad, to be for or against the good and ultimately to be for or against God.

Given these two spheres of the one freedom, we can make a judgment about actions as right or wrong and about the moral quality of the person as good or bad. The unity of the person makes these judgments interrelated.

Since we experience God in mediated ways, we ultimately establish how we stand before God on the basis of particular choices. For this reason, the fundamental freedom to become a certain sort of person is always incarnated in the choices of particular actions, or the concrete kinds of behavior.
that we engage in throughout life. While we might want to distinguish these freedoms, it would be a mistake to separate radically the fundamental freedom and the deliberate choices of concrete acts.

The theological roots supporting the fundamental freedom on a radical level before God are found in the basic conviction of the covenantal experience. That is, God has created us out of love for love. Without destroying our freedom, God’s love for us has so affected us in our innermost being as to make a claim on us and to give us an orientation toward love and life. Our responsibility now is to live out of this orientation toward love.

The commitment we make to live in covenant with God and oriented toward love is a basic act of faith. This act is the fundamental option. A negative fundamental option would be the explicit and formal rejection of God and neighbor.

The fundamental option is profoundly linked to all the particular acts that we express in progressing toward our end, even though it may not be fully expressed in any one of them. Not to see our acts of free choice linked to our fundamental option would fall prey to the dualism that separates the unity of the moral person as a composite of body and soul.

Thus, our fundamental option is always, even if not totally, brought into play in our free decisions. It influences and is expressed in decisions about actions. The fundamental option and individual acts are mutually related and interpenetrate. Thus, doing morally good acts reinforces and deepens this option, while doing morally evil ones would weaken and destroy it.

This understanding of the fundamental option does not undermine the reality of sin. Rather, it strengthens it. On the reality of mortal sin and its distinction from venial sin, the encyclical affirms the threefold condition for mortal sin. To commit a mortal sin, we must be engaging in (1) grave matter with (2) full awareness and (3) deliberate consent. As the encyclical affirms, mortal sin exists "when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered" (no. 70). Venial sins would be evil acts that do not completely satisfy these three criteria.

The notion of fundamental option and its link to particular acts does not undermine these criteria nor the validity of the distinction between mortal and venial sins. In fact, it deepens our sense of mortal sin.

From the point of view of the fundamental option, we can say that mortal sin is the conscious, deliberate choice for an action in which the sinner shows contempt for God’s law and a rejection of God’s love and so turns away from God’s love and ceases to be loving toward others. The responsible use of the fundamental option as a way of approaching sin does not minimize the significance of individual actions in assessing sin. In fact, the fundamental-option approach to sin forces us to take actions seriously.

Even though not every act involves the entire fundamental option, individual acts are able to express or alter it when undertaken consciously and freely. So, if we grow careless about acting rightly, we can erode our commitment to the good and end up reversing our fundamental option.

This approach to the fundamental option recognizes that certain acts embody more clearly than others the sinner’s rejection of God’s love and contempt for the moral good. So, we can say along with the encyclical that we commit a mortal sin when, with full awareness that a particular act contradicts the love of God, we decide nevertheless in favor of it and through this act reshape our commitment to be for life and for love. While this judgment may seem harsh, the encyclical reminds us that it is often far from clear whether someone has made a choice with full deliberation and full awareness.

5. The moral act and moral absolutes

Being able to determine what makes our actions morally right or wrong is important, not only because our actions will affect the affairs of the world for good or ill but also because our actions are the pathway leading to or away from the fullness of life in union with God. Determining the morality of actions is no light matter, nor is it always easy.

In opposition to certain versions of goal-oriented moral theories, such as those which have come to be known as forms of "consequentialism" and "proportionalism," the encyclical states that the moral evaluation of human acts cannot be drawn solely from weighing the good and bad effects resulting from the choice. Even a good intention is not enough to justify the goodness of a choice.

The morality of human actions is defined by their relation to the moral order established by God. This order can be known by reason (natural law) informed by faith (revelation). In light of faith and reason, then, we can determine whether our actions are in harmony with the true good of the person and thus expressive of and oriented toward our true end, God, the One in whom we find perfect happiness.

The "object of the human act" is the decisive element in making the judgment on the morality of human actions. Therefore, we have to be careful to define the object accurately by including the material and formal elements of the act. For an act whose object is moral can become immoral if we change the intention and/or the circumstances. For example, the act of giving money to a charitable cause can become immoral if the intention is to promote self-interest by participating in graft and corruption.

As the encyclical affirms, an act is morally right when its object is in conformity with the true good of the person and so is ordered to God through charity (no. 78). However, some ob-
jects of the human act are incapable of being so ordered. These are the sort of actions that natural law discovers to be against the moral order of the good of persons, or which revelation declares to be against God’s law. These are also known as “negative moral absolutes,” or “intrinsically evil actions.” We considered these sorts of actions under the absolute, negative prohibitions of natural law treated above.

Any norm that prohibits intrinsically evil actions is absolute. Such a norm obliges without exception. Once an action is judged to be intrinsically evil, nothing can ever justify it. Adhering to negative moral absolutes protects not only the dignity of persons but it also preserves the social fabric and its proper development.

**PART III:**

**THE MORAL GOOD FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD**

The last part of the encyclical turns to pastoral concerns. It devotes considerable space to martyrdom. In the context of opposing ethical relativism and upholding the fulfillment of freedom through obedience to the absolute demands of love, the encyclical holds up martyrs as inviolable witnesses to the unconditional respect due to the requirements of the dignity of the person and to the truths of an objective moral order. The saints, especially the martyrs, show best of all how a commitment to faith and to truth affects the moral life. Martyrdom is the cost of adherence to faith and truth. What makes it possible to live according to moral truth and to do what is right is grace — the Spirit of God living within us.

This last part also urges bishops to exercise their responsibility to preach Christian morality and to assure that those who teach Catholic theology represent the teaching of the Church. The ministry of moral theologians is to be in service to the Church and in communion with the bishops in seeing that the authentic Word of God is proclaimed in moral matters.

In this context, the encyclical expresses its opposition to dissent. The teaching of the encyclical on this issue shows clearly that “dissent” is an unfortunate and misleading term, at least for the Catholic Church in America.

“Dissent” is too much of an ambivalent word to be useful in theological discussion. It is a volatile term at worst, and an imperfect term at least. It is volatile because of its many negative connotations, indicating nothing positive. It suggests disloyalty, disrespect, irreverence, and even contempt for the magisterium. It is imperfect because its meaning is too sweeping with no recognizable boundaries. It could mean no more than disagreement with the logic of a position or the conclusion of a reflective process. But it can also have the political dimension of strident confrontation with authority or the radical opposition of rebels who are ready to break the bond of unity.

The encyclical clarifies the magisterium’s understanding of “dissent” when it declares: “Dissent, in the form of carefully orchestrated protests and polemics carried on in the media, is opposed to ecclesial communion and to a correct understanding of the hierarchical constitution of the People of God” (no. 113).

We can certainly appreciate that dissent in this form would be a disservice to the Church. The Church is not a representative democracy, and its moral teachings do not depend on the deliberative procedures of democratic processes.

The encyclical’s clarification of the magisterium’s understanding of “dissent” helps us to distinguish the difference between dissent, as an “orchestrated protest” along the lines of a political strategy or rebellion, and the reality of withholding assent, or of having difficulties with certain aspects of a teaching, or even of disagreeing with certain arguments proposed to justify a teaching or of the manner in which a teaching is presented.

So it hardly follows from the encyclical’s position on dissent that ongoing discussion of the ordinary teaching of the magisterium has no place within the Church. How else will truth be attained, mistakes corrected, or confusion clarified? The real issue is how to express one’s judgments. Raising objections in the proper spirit and through the proper channels can contribute to the good of the Church by providing a stimulus to the magisterium to propose the teaching of the Church in greater depth and with a clearer presentation of the arguments. Attitudinally, one who seriously considers a teaching and comes to a different conclusion may not be dissenting at all, but more accurately consenting to the search for a better understanding of the Christian mysteries.

**A ringing affirmation**

In sum, the encyclical is confident that we can know and do what is right. It is a ringing affirmation that morality is God-given. Being good is not simply a moral action but a profoundly religious one, since morality cannot be divorced from faith. Within this theocentric context, the encyclical affirms an objective moral order constituting the rule and norm of holiness for all.

There is right and wrong; there is sin and grace. These realities can be known through revelation and through natural law, which is of divine origin and accessible to all. Revelation and natural law disclose certain actions that are so offensive to human dignity that they can never be done. The magisterium protects and promotes human dignity by proclaiming the moral truth disclosed in revelation and in the hearts of all. Through a sincere effort to learn from the teaching of the Church so that we can form our consciences according to moral truth, we will be guided to a life of holiness, responsive to the will of God and transformed in Christ who is our way, our truth and our life.

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