

## John Paul II, *VERITATIS SPLENDOR* (1993)

### 1. Context: The Modern World and Contemporary Moral Theology

The Church has always also encouraged moral thinkers of faith to “do Theology” about moral matters. *Veritatis Splendor* (‘VS’ hereafter) (‘The Splendour of Truth’ in Latin) is a rather different encyclical from many others in that it addresses some fundamental technical questions of Moral Theology. Pope John Paul II does not so much discuss particular moral issues like euthanasia, abortion or genetic manipulation (which belong to ‘practical ethics’). Rather, he discusses foundational questions about morality *per se*: for instance, what are the criteria of right and wrong, rather than which kinds of act are right or wrong. The encyclical has things to say about many topics in Moral Theology. This brief introduction will sketch the main topics the Pope addresses while giving some historical context for the writing of VS.

#### *The 1960-1980s*

Prior to Vatican II, Moral Theology had become sterile about foundations and, in applications, caught up in an unproductive casuistry<sup>1</sup> and legalism. There were calls for a renewal of moral theology leading up to and as part of the Council. In particular, many felt the need to explore the Scriptural bases of Christian morality, its connections with other aspects of Christian faith and how Christian ethics could illuminate the many challenges of contemporary life. The morality of war, sexuality, maintaining life, organ transplantation, reproductive technologies, genetics and consumer society all became urgent during the 1960-80s. Challenges to traditional social authorities like political institutions, medicine, science, the churches, education, the law and business corporations led to new legislative and judicial enshrinement of individual rights, especially the right to self-determination and autonomous conscience. The state’s traditional role to enforce morality in private lives was gradually undermined. Thus, in the West, larger areas of personal moral discretion were given legal effect and cultural entrenchment. Against such a background, starting in the 1960s, the call for renewal in Moral Theology sparked a period of considerable ferment which raised questions about many foundational topics in Moral Theology as well as in their practical applications. Much of this work was highly valued by the church but some of it raised difficulties for the Vatican. The most prominent example of the latter was the case of Charles Curran whose right to teach as a Catholic theologian was withdrawn in 1986 over his views about certain moral questions and his right to dissent from the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church. This matter was doubtless one of the sparks that prompted the writing of VS.

#### *Themes in Moral Theology: Proportionalism and Prohibitions of Evil Actions*

The term “Proportionalism” has been applied to the work of many contemporary moral theologians (especially by critics) but arguably many of them agree in placing

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<sup>1</sup> Formally speaking, ‘casuistry’ refers to the ‘examination of difficult cases’. In itself, this is not unproductive. However, casuistry in pre-Vatican II Moral Theology sought to explain how we could retain strong prohibitive rules but accept quite common-sensical judgements that are apparently inconsistent with those rules. This is what made a case ‘difficult’. Yet foundational issues were not addressed deeply nor more general significance attached to challenging cases than to solving immediate problems about what should be done. And all too often, the treatment of such cases failed to carry conviction because it resorted to obscure and what seemed to many to be dubious logical principles.

an emphasis on the importance of ‘weighing’ good and bad aspects of action to determine if there exists a “proportion” or “reasonable balancing” of values at stake in decision making. Typical proportionalists do not deny that morality depends on the ‘intrinsic nature of actions’ in some sense, however, many theologians thought of as “proportionalists” are understood to allow that good intentions or good consequences can “outweigh” the evil involved in performing certain kinds of act like theft, contraception, taking human life and so on. This seems to imply that all kinds of evil acts, though evil, are only so evil that very good consequences or very good intentions could justify doing them. Are there, then, acts so evil that nothing could justify doing them, not even avoiding great suffering or other more harmful evil?

*Themes in Moral Theology: Fundamental Option, Intentions and Intrinsic Morality of Actions*

If human actions that are morally assessable, they must be free or deliberate. Freedom and deliberation require the formation of intentions or are voluntary. Seen from one direction, it follows that, understood in *abstraction* from intention ‘what a person does’ is ‘merely factual’ or ‘physical’ and hence, *intrinsically*, the facts about events do not themselves seem to be *moral* subject matter. Thus, intentions come to be thought of as the “bearers” of the intrinsic morality of action.

Combined with renewed thought about the importance of the fundamental orientation of life for Christian conversion, this thought naturally invites the possibility that an agent with a fundamental option for Christ has already, as it were, done what is most needful for salvation and the rest of her life- what concrete acts she performs- must be seen in this light and go less deep. If intention, especially ultimate intention of the fundamental option, is the bearer of the intrinsic morality of acts, and the only other kind of factor that can be relevant is the consequences, Proportionalism seems to be committed to the thought that apart from in the concrete complex details of life, good intentions or good consequences are the elements in a moral conception of ‘what an agent does’. However, might not a well-intended agent unwittingly do something bad without thinking truly of what they done? The agent’s action can have a significance that quite escapes the agent without this implying that the agent has an excuse. There is a notion of intrinsic morality found in the *significance or meaning of what one does*, where this can stand in contrast to what one means, intends or thinks oneself to be doing. How important, then, are good intentions if what one does is itself morally wrong according to the commandments as interpreted by official Church teaching? What can be made of the notion that a kind of action is intrinsically evil?

*Themes in Moral Theology: Autonomy, Conscience and the Authority of Truth*

The importance of conscience as a source of moral knowledge had been a central theme of Catholic Moral Theology since the twelfth century. It has been a theme of Catholic tradition that one is obliged to follow one’s conscience. However, given that people’s consciences are not all virtuous, and that some moral questions are difficult even for the virtuous and wise to come to a judgement about, it seems clear that, understood objectively, conscience can be wrong. Is one obliged to obey her conscience when it is wrong, even though she has done her best honestly to work out what is right to do and what would be wrong to do, or she cannot honestly understand why the church teaches that something is wrong when not doing it can cause most serious consequences? In thinking about such questions, contemporary Moral

Theology has put quite an emphasis on personal autonomy as a requirement of morally responsible action. Is this the right emphasis to make in such question if the commandments are the truth about the human good?

It can be seen from the above that the situation in Moral Theology which *Veritatis Splendor* addresses is one of considerable debate. Because bishops are the people in the church responsible for sound teaching and moral guidance of the church, the Pope addresses the encyclical to them. In guiding the bishops, the encyclical seeks to engage some of the debates in Moral Theology in order to guard against certain lines of thought which the Pope sees as inconsistent with the Catholic tradition (The Pope is also careful to emphasise the Church's appreciation for the considerable valuable work of contemporary Moral Theology). The Encyclical also addresses more widespread tendencies of contemporary culture that threaten the traditional sense of the objectivity of moral realities and the 'absoluteness' of certain moral values.

## 2. Overview of the document

The encyclical consists of three chapters with a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the encyclical and a closing meditation on Mary as the exemplary realization of the unity of truth, freedom and joy.

**Chapter 1** is a meditation on the story of the Rich Young Man in Matthew's Gospel. This meditation sees the moral life within the context of the search for fulfilment and perfection in eternal life. The Pope returns to this reflection on the Matthean story at the end of chapter 3 thus framing the examination of themes in Moral Theology in this vision of the moral life as part of the search for eternal life .

**Chapter 2** is entitled with the St. Paul's warning "Be not Conformed to This World" (Rom 12:2). The longest chapter, it is the kernel of the critical teaching of the encyclical. It is divided into four sections: I Freedom and Law; II Conscience and Truth; III Fundamental Choice and Specific Kinds of Behaviour; and IV The Moral Act. Sections I and II form an argument connecting freedom, law and truth; and Sections III and IV are a unit connecting intention, fundamental option, the criteria of right and wrong and the intrinsic morality of actions.

**Chapter 3** is entitled "Lest the Cross of Christ be Emptied of its Power" (1Cor 1:17). A central strand of the Pope's argument in chapter 1-2 of the encyclical is that certain kinds of act (eg. murder, adultery, rape, abortion, lying ...) are never justifiable by good consequences (or the avoidance of bad consequences) or by good intentions. In this sense, some moral rules are 'absolute' and prohibit intrinsically wrong acts. In Chapter 3, the Pope addresses two thoughts: (a) that the current state of the world undermines of such a view (of life, sexual faithfulness in marriage, pregnancy ...) but as such, imposes on the faithful the calling to live up the high standards of faithfulness to God's law which prohibits intrinsically wrong acts (as part of the calling to service in love in the richness of eternal life); and (b) that obedience to such prohibitions can be costly to Christians but is part of faithfulness of the Christian life and is richly supported, empowered and blessed by the generosity of divine grace. It is only in turning towards Christ crucified as the living embodiment of the unity of human freedom and law in the moral life that the Christian will find the source necessary and sufficient for cleaving to the challenges of the moral life to retain her integrity.

Overall, the encyclical strikes a new note about the nature of the moral life by situating its importance so firmly in the perspective of eternal life and seeing in Christ's crucifixion the model of the Christian's faithfulness to the moral law, both in its aspect of refraining from certain kinds of act at all times, and also in its aspect of the pursuit of fulfilment, autonomy and responsibility in loving service. The encyclical continues the contemporary response to renew Moral Theology by rooting in Scripture and a pastoral vision rather than a narrow legalism. It could be argued too that the encyclical also places a new emphasis in its conception of the Natural Law as founded for its authority in God's will as expressed in the revelation of the Commandments, rather than in reason's independent certainty in disclosing what is good by reflection on human experience.

### 3. Key points of document

*As a moral matter, refraining from those kinds of act prohibited by the Commandments is an integral aspect of living with perfect fulfilment in eternal life.*

Following Jesus' way of dealing with the rich young man, the encyclical distinguishes between the observance of the prohibitions such as not to kill, not to bear false witness and the like; and the way to a more perfect fulfilment in eternal life. The encyclical is careful to emphasise the importance of observance of the prohibitions on such kinds of act as those listed in those commandments and others implied by them. But it also links the following of Jesus in the way of Christian perfection with the moral life.

*True freedom is found in not in freedom from being subject to law but in obedience to the law of God which is given for our good; an obedience which is exercised out of recognition of the truth about the human good grasped in the judgement of conscience on right and wrong*

Law and freedom are not opposed. Rather, a life lived lawlessly, self-indulgently or without regard to truth about how one should live, becomes slavery to desire and self-will. Freedom is found in the responsible exercise of conscience as a judgement on what to do in particular situations; responsible conscience is answerable to truth; obedience to divine law as truth about human good is what conscience yields; freedom is found in the obedience of conscience to truth in divine law. From here we can see the importance of the theme of the importance of truth in the encyclical's presentation of morality.

*Conscience which incorrectly judges what is right or wrong about an action, where its ignorance cannot be overcome in the circumstances, retains its dignity.*

Since human moral understanding and conscience is called by truth about human good, failure to make correct judgement or to be informed about Church teaching about the divine law results in ignorant or erroneous conscience. Such ignorance can be due to a failure to do what one could to be informed or it might be no fault of one's own that one was not informed. If the ignorance of knowledge of the divine law or an erroneous judgement of conscience is due to factors one could not have overcome, conscience retains its dignity.

*Having a fundamental life orientation for Christ is not sufficient for one's actions to be morally good; good intentions, even fundamental ones about one's life's being for Christ, are not enough to ensure that one's choices are good.*

Before Vatican II, Moral Theology placed a great deal of emphasis on what is known as 'final option', that is, the opportunity God's graciousness and mercy gives us sincerely to seek forgiveness for a sinful life even if at the last moment before death. Of course, this thought is prone to abuse if one thinks that one can sin without consequences but receive forgiveness on one's death bed. This kind of lax attitude towards one's moral life raises the question of the fundamental orientation of a person's life. Is one's commitment *fundamentally* for or against Christ? Thinking about this has led contemporary Moral Theology to lay a new emphasis on the

fundamental orientation of one's life- on Fundamental Option. This conversion of one's heart at its most fundamental level is of the deepest importance to the Christian life. This renewed emphasis on fundamental option is itself susceptible of abuse. The encyclical urges that a person's fundamental option for God does not remove from them the obligation to ensure that their life in more specific detail, in the acts they do, is good. Good intention, even of this fundamentally good kind, is not sufficient for living a morally good life. One's individual actions must also be good.

*An action can be wrong even though one does not see that it is and does not intend to be doing something wrong; the act itself, its significance in itself (possibly in contrast to how one thinks of it) can be what makes it intrinsically wrong; good intentions and good outcomes are not enough to make it good.*

The encyclical makes prominent the morality of the intrinsic nature of actions in contrast to putting an emphasis on either having good intentions and/or having good consequences in making acts right or wrong. That is, the criteria of right and wrong are not exhausted by the act's being well intended or having good outcomes. Some acts are wrong of their very nature, in abstraction from the intentions with which they are done and of the consequences they might turn out to have. Even evil acts can be well intended or have good outcomes. Their wrongness does not depend on circumstances, consequences, the intentions with which one acts, or anything else besides the fact that they are a murder, a rape, an act of torture or the like. Such acts are wrong in themselves and there are no instances where doing them is morally acceptable. The Church's moral teaching has always included that such kinds of acts are intrinsically wrong because they fail to be ordered to the point of human life, union with God.

*Christians have the challenge of giving witness to the world that certain kinds of action are intrinsically wrong.*

The encyclical urges that the contemporary world is losing or has lost its sense that there are kinds of act that are intrinsically evil without exception. The Pope therefore exhorts Christians to serve in love their fellow human beings by faithfully living by the commandments, including those which prohibit these kinds of action. In this way, Christians give vital witness to God's love for humanity and to the higher calling to which we are all, not just Christians, called to live within the limitations of the divine will expressing the human good. In this obedience to the truth of the commandments about the human good, even though it may be very costly in worldly terms, Christians will be calling their brothers and sisters back to their destiny of union with God in loving service.

#### 4. Key quotations from document

##### *Freedom and the Truth of the Human Good: Law and Conscience*

No. 54 The relationship between man's freedom and God's law is most deeply lived out in the 'heart' of the person, in his moral conscience.

No. 58 The importance of this interior dialogue of man with himself can never be adequately appreciated. But it is also a dialogue of man with god, the author of the law, the primordial image and final end of man ... Thus it can be said that conscience bears witness to man's own rectitude or iniquity to man himself but, together with this and indeed even beforehand, conscience is the witness of God himself, whose voice and judgement penetrate the depths of man's soul, calling him *fortiter et suaviter* to obedience.

No. 61 The truth about moral good, as that truth is declared in the law of reason, is practically and concretely recognised by the judgement of conscience, which leads one to take responsibility for the good or the evil one has done. ....Consequently *in the practical judgement of conscience*, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, *the link between freedom and truth is made manifest*. Precisely for this reason, conscience expresses itself in acts of 'judgement' which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary 'decisions'. The maturity and responsibility of these judgements ... are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions.

No. 64 The words of Jesus (Mt. 6:22-23) also represent a call to *form our conscience*, to make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good. ... Christians have a great help for the formation of conscience *in the Church and her Magisterium*.

##### *Fundamental Option and Concrete Actions*

No. 67 ... To separate fundamental option [for Christ, for living a morally good life] from concrete kinds of behaviour means to contradict the substantial integrity or personal unity of the moral agent in his body and his soul. A fundamental option understood without explicit consideration of the potentialities which it puts into effect and the determinations which express it does not do justice to the rational finality immanent in man's acting and in each of his deliberate decisions. .... Judgements about morality cannot be made without taking into consideration whether or not the deliberate choice of a specific kind of behaviour is in conformity with the dignity and integral vocation of the human person. .... Every choice always implies a reference by the deliberate will to the good and evils indicated by the natural law as goods to be pursued and evils to be avoided. .... But the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exceptions.

##### *The 'Intrinsic Morality of Actions' and the Prohibition of exceptionlessly evil Kinds of Act*

No. 74 But on what does the moral assessment of man's free acts depend? What is it that ensures this *ordering of human acts to God*? Is it the *intention* of the acting subject, the *circumstances*- and in particular, the consequences- of his actions, or the *object* itself of his act? This is what is traditionally called the problem of the 'sources of morality'.

No. 78. *The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the 'object' rationally chosen by the deliberate will, ....* The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behaviour. ... that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person. ...

No. 80 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. These are the acts which, in the Church's moral tradition, have been termed 'intrinsically evil' ...: they are such *always and per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances. Consequently, without in the least denying the influence on morality exercised by circumstances and especially by intentions, the Church teaches that 'there exist acts which *per se* and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reasons of their object.'

*The Costs of Discipleship in being faithful to the Prohibitions of the Natural Law, Christ of the Model of Witness and Divine Grace in the Christian Life*

No. 102 Even in the most difficult of situations 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. Certainly, maintaining a harmony between freedom and truth occasionally demands uncommon sacrifices, and must be won at a high price: it can even involve martyrdom.

No. 103 Man always has before him the spiritual horizon of hope, thanks to the *help of divine grace* and with *the cooperation of human freedom*. It is in the saving Cross of Jesus, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, in the Sacraments which flow forth from the pierced side of the Redeemer (cf. Jn 19:34), that believers find the grace and the strength always to keep God's holy law, even amid the gravest of hardships.

## 5. Reception

John Paul II had announced his intention to write an encyclical on the foundations of moral theology in August 1987. Since *VS* was to be the first sustained papal discussion of Moral Theology, the eventual publication of the encyclical in August 1993 had been anticipated for many years by both Catholics and other Christians. The encyclical went through many drafts, indicative of the importance attached to the encyclical by John Paul II. The publication of *VS* was greeted with great interest by the whole Christian world.

In general, it is fair to say that some Catholics welcomed the encyclical for its strong assertion of the importance of exceptionless moral prohibitions of certain kinds of act for salvation. Such Catholics tended to see the encyclical as reaffirming traditional moral teaching against certain contemporary moral theologians whom they thought to be calling into radical question central traditional teaching. Some of these also saw it as a welcome exercise of the Church's Magisterium in issuing authoritative doctrine to correct an impression that the church's authority in moral matters depended importantly on the work of moral theologians rather than the teaching office of bishops.

Others, those who identified with or were identified with, the theologians putatively being criticised by the encyclical, generally reacted critically to the encyclical. Some of those apparently put on the defensive by the encyclical adopted the approach of claiming the document to be saying nothing they could not themselves say and emphasised aspects of its teaching they found most congenial, downplaying other aspects. Others debated with the document directly arguing that at worst it shows signs of self-contradiction and at best, argues merely by insinuation as the encyclical mentions no specific theologians by name. Without the disciplines and fairness of open discussion of specific thinkers' teachings, the encyclical defames the intended targets of the criticisms as heterodox by exaggerating and distorting their views without giving them a decent chance to defend themselves. The encyclical contents itself with naming "tendencies" and "trends of thought" in which most of the moral theologians who were the apparent targets for criticism, could not see their work. Many on this side of the debates in moral theology took the encyclical to be arguing against, if not exactly a straw man, then *distortions or exaggerations* of the teachings that they had been defending over the years. Some speculate that the central second chapter shows the specialist hand of (a) critic(s) of 'Proportionalism'.

Overall, *VS* could be seen as a watershed in John Paul II's relationship with the more "progressive" wing of the Catholic Church. Where many saw in his early papacy and his earlier papal writings an exciting engagement of grave ills in the modern world and a modern rethinking of Christian theological ideas, they now came to be less confident that this was so, even to the point, for some, of suffering a certain alienation from those who currently exercise the office of the Magisterium. For they saw contemporary moral theology as engaging the modern world and its crises of faith and hope, but were now, apparently, being told in this encyclical that some of the most distinctive contributions of contemporary moral theology in this cause have to be rejected as being too far out of keeping with traditional moral teaching.

Overall, some 15 years later, it is not clear that moral theologians have been much chastened in their work because of the encyclical. In the main, though the term 'proportionalism' is avoided, many continue to explore theological options much as they had been doing. It can be said, though, that a somewhat less boldly adventurous spirit animates Moral Theology than before the encyclical. Generally, moral philosophers who are Catholic have responded fairly critically to the encyclical, but, being philosophers, did not bear the odium associated with questioning church teaching that attaches to theologians.

Outside the Catholic world, the encyclical has been received with a mixture of admiration and distress. Some see it as affirming traditional Christian teaching at its best, others find it to be an exercise in power more than an exercise of moral authority reflectively engaged with difficult moral problems in a collegial way.

*VS* was one of John Paul II's more controversial and perhaps divisive encyclicals in church circles and an unusual one in that it sought to engage technical issues of moral theology and give rulings on certain of its debates. This is *somewhat* unusual for a Pope to do in an encyclical in quite the technical detail one finds in *VS*. Specifically as Moral Theology, the encyclical is important for the way it situates at a general level the importance of leading a morally conscientious life, not only for one's daily life, but also for one's faith, one's Christian witness and one's engagement as a Christian with the socio-political world. Arguably, however, *VS* was also an attempt to engage certain kinds of relativism and exaggerated liberalism in the *broader* culture of the West beyond Moral Theology. These views tend to erode confidence in the reality of morality's claims on us or its importance in living a life that is worth living. Against such views, the encyclical can be studied with profit even by Christians without any professional training in the technicalities of contemporary moral theology. In the meantime, the debates of moral theology continue and have somewhat moved on in different directions. However, these themes of the encyclical remain issues of abiding importance in understanding the nature of the moral life.

## 6. Discussion Questions

(7 questions)

1. What place does religious faith have in working out right from wrong?
2. What place does living a morally good life have in salvation and eternal life?
3. What role do the consequences of an action have in making it the right or the wrong thing to do?
4. What role do the intentions with which one acts have in making one's action the right or the wrong thing to do?
5. What is the 'object' of an action we perform or a choice we make? Can anything be made of the notion of 'the intrinsic nature' of an action, understood in abstraction from the intention with which it is performed or how it is understood by the agent?
6. Are there kinds of action that are so evil as not even to be 'thinkable', under any circumstances, no matter what one is hoping to achieve, or what good consequences might come of it?
7. What is the role of conscience in 'determining' right and wrong in the concrete and complex details of life? How is it related to general moral principles or the moral law?

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[http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0222/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0222/_INDEX.HTM)

William May's exposition of *Veritatis Splendor*

<http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/may/veritas.htm>

Richard McCormick's response to *Veritatis Splendor*

<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=3&hid=114&sid=3b5402f7-76b4-4287-8e0c-8feddbeba92c%40sessionmgr108>