

When the Morally “Right” Thing to Do Is Difficult: Reflections on a True “Pastoral” Approach in John Paul II’s *Veritatis Splendor*

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In the moral life, there are situations in which it is difficult to know *what is* the right thing to do. On the other hand, there are types of moral actions in which no such intellectual difficulty exists, where the right thing to do is *very* clear, yet hesitation or even rejection of the moral law arises because to persist in virtuous living seems too difficult. For example, as St. Augustine writes in his *Confessions*: “Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.” Augustine is not unclear about what he ought to do, yet he perceives that there remains a real gap between the truth of the moral law and his own ability to live virtuously what love demands.

Christian moral theology reveals that this “gap” is not at all unusual, nor even surprising. Given original sin and its effects on the human heart, man stands in genuine need of a redeemer. For this reason, the task of moral theology today cannot involve merely presenting the truth of the moral law, important as it is; it must empower the human heart to live it. I argue that, to inspire and transform hearts, moral theology must be presented within the biblical *story* of salvation and lead to a personal encounter with Christ. Indeed, this is precisely what the Second Vatican Council called for when it insisted that theologians take “special care” in the renewal of moral theology. The Council fathers insisted that, in its presentation, moral theology needs to be more deeply animated by Scripture, to integrate with dogmatic theology, and most of all, to find its place within the mystery of Christ.¹

¹ Vatican II, Decree on Priestly Training *Optatam Totius*, §16. On the renewal of moral

In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how Pope John Paul II's insights in his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (*VS*) can aid in a *pastoral* approach to morally difficult situations.² It is no secret that he wrote this encyclical to address the widespread dissent among Catholic moral theologians who dissented from the magisterium on difficult moral issues such as contraception, abortion, divorce, in vitro fertilization, and homosexuality by attempting to reinvent the foundational principles of morality, which led to a whole host of errors. Yet, even though one can prove demonstratively the truth of the moral law, there still remains the pastoral question: "But what am I to do, if remaining faithful is very difficult?" "What can I do when I cannot seem to rise to what love demands, or I am afraid of what love will cost me?" In this paper, I will share three key insights from his work that lead to an effective pastoral response: (1) to rediscover the purpose of living a moral life, (2) to recognize the missing human good in difficult circumstances, (3) to receive the fullness of sacramental grace. Whereas some theologians openly encourage dissent from the Church's moral teaching for "pastoral" reasons, John Paul II argues that there is nothing more "pastoral" than the power of sacramental grace.

Rediscover Purpose: The Moral Life as a Call to Divine Intimacy and Mission

In his book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Simon Sinek has powerfully argued that all great leaders lead by answering the most important question: *why* does this organization or company or rule exist? Great leaders inspire with the purpose. Not surprisingly, when it comes to the question "why should I follow the moral law?," Jesus Christ, in Matt 19, also leads the rich young man with the "why."

In the encounter, Christ acknowledges the young man's predicament when he approaches him with the question, "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" Merely remaining obedient to the law as though it were nothing more than a checklist is not enough to satisfy the deep

theology, see Paulinus Odozor, C.S.Sp., *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition since Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 17–43. See also William May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1991), 23–40.

² See *VS* §84: "A comparison between the Church's teaching and today's social and cultural situation immediately makes clear the urgent need for the Church herself to develop *an intense pastoral effort* precisely with regard to this fundamental question" (emphasis mine).

longings of the young man's heart. John Paul II comments that "the young man's question is not so much about rules to be followed, but about the full meaning of life. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action" (*VS* §7). Christ knows that the young man is searching for the "why," for the ultimate meaning and purpose of his life. He yearns for a deeper union with God to satisfy his heart. That is why Christ's first response is to direct him immediately to God: "There is only one who is good." Christ's words situate the moral life within its ultimate *telos*: union and intimacy with God.

Thus, in the biblical revelation, the moral life presents itself as a key step along the path of a genuine spiritual life, a call to holiness culminating in divine intimacy. As John Paul II makes clear in his analysis of the Decalogue, "Acknowledging the Lord as God is the very core, the heart of the law, from which the particular precepts flow and towards which they are ordered" (*VS* §11). The biblical context of the Decalogue in Exodus involves the prior loving initiative of God, who rescued his people and drew them into the wilderness on Mount Sinai. There, hidden from the eyes of the world, God revealed his divine presence to Israel in a sacrificial banquet and shared his innermost desire that Israel would *belong* to him as his "special possession" in a unique and intimate way. This biblical context most profoundly reveals the "why." The moral life is not lived simply for its own sake, nor even merely for the sake of the "good life" as one might find in philosophy, but from a biblical perspective, John Paul II argues, "the moral life presents itself as the *response* to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man" (*VS* §10). Significantly, John Paul II properly restores the place of the moral life within the whole *story* of salvation: being rescued by God, turning from sin, and living out one's intimate covenantal bond with God by growing in holiness. While it remains perennially true that the moral law exists for human flourishing and happiness, the deeper biblical "why" is that stepping out on the path towards holiness ultimately leads the soul to intimacy with God.

And yet, there is more! One of the most fascinating aspects of the Bible is that God never calls someone to a deep union with himself without also calling him or her to an important pastoral mission. This was true for Israel, when Yahweh called her to be a "kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Exod 19:6), and this paradigm of mission remains true in the Gospels. Returning to the rich young man's encounter with Christ, in the midst of their dialogue about keeping the commandments, Christ invites the young man to sell all that he owns and "Come follow me." These words are astounding! Christ calls the young man to an adventure with him, one that will challenge the young man to give courageously of his time, his possessions, and his heart

much more than he has ever given before. Perhaps secretly, the young man yearns for such an amazing mission, yet he fears what such a call might cost him. He remains afraid. The young man is caught between his love of comfort and ease and the deeper demands of his heart to do something courageous for God. He too feels with sadness the “gap” between where he currently is and who Christ is calling him to become.

In the biblical vision, mission is so significantly tied with morality that failing to find and live one’s personal mission is what ultimately sets man up for moral failure. Consider the great King David, who fell into adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah because, instead of fulfilling his mission of leading his army, he remained at home, comfortable, idle, and safe. Thus, not only does embracing a God-given mission save us from ourselves, but serving others necessarily requires the *exercise* of virtue, prayer, and seeking out of God’s guidance, and hence aids in moral and spiritual growth. That is why, biblically, when Christ invites his people to a deeper union with himself, he simultaneously invites them to “Come follow me” on a distinctive mission, and so to grow in the perfection of love.

Thus, John Paul II insists: “Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality. . . . This is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves *holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and destiny” (*VS* §19). John Paul II is arguing that, at the very foundation for Christian morality is the call to union with Christ that leads to the discovery of a personal mission, so that, in him, through him, with him, for him, this mission then becomes the pathway to perfect love. The moral life presents itself as a response to the discovery of so great a God, who commands deep reverence for his design in creation, and who invites man to intimately know his love and give it to others. This refreshingly biblical vision of morality leads the soul to awaken to Christ’s love, and presents the challenge of offering one’s life and heart to him in a holy mission. Only living such a passionate purpose could satisfy the deep longings of the human heart. In his 1946 *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl has wisely said: “Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how.’”

Recognize the Missing Good and Attend to What Is Lacking: Reengaging the Virtue of Prudence

Whereas the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* (§§6–27) gives the biblical “why” behind the moral law, the second chapter (§§28–83) focuses much more significantly on the natural law. John Paul II affirms that the natural

law reveals an integrative *order* that leads to genuine human flourishing. For this reason, *it is imperative in pastoral situations not to overlook missing aspects of the fully human good*, as many so-called “difficulties” can be relieved, and discouraged hearts encouraged with greater attention to providing what is lacking. Let me provide one example to illustrate the point.

When difficulties arise in the marriage relationship, Catholic leaders are quick to respond by saying that “love is not a feeling; it is an act of the will.” While true in part, such a response, however, overlooks the genuine human need for *emotional* intimacy, which is often missing as a relationship begins to crumble. A more wholesome and integrative approach would rightly recognize the missing human good, and acknowledge that, emotional intimacy, not surprisingly, is rooted in emotions and feelings. In fact, as John Paul II argues in *Love and Responsibility*, true tenderness in marriage requires “a steady participation in emotion; . . . for it is this that binds a man and a woman close together.”³

He also argues that to understand marriage pastorally requires significant attention to sexual difference. For example, he argues that a man yearns to give love to his wife and delights when she admires him and receives his love.⁴ Women, on the other hand, yearn to be pursued, cherished, as this corresponds to the deep ache in the feminine heart to be loved as a bride. In the end, man and woman are not just generic “partners.” Masculinity and femininity are realities in the natural law that go beyond biology and deeply affect the core of the human heart. This is in fact, what the Church calls “sexual complementarity.”⁵ John Paul also argues that women have a much greater need for tenderness in marriage based on sexual difference: first, their emotional life is already much “richer” than a man’s and needs to be attended to; second, women experience greater sadness in separating from their family of origin when they marry, especially in the modern world where families live farther apart. This can make certain moral teachings, like Pope Paul VI’s 1968 *Humanae Vitae*, more difficult in practice as the normal support God intended for family life is often lacking. Third, women take on enormous sacrifices in childbearing and rearing which can leave them feeling depleted if they are not encouraged to prioritize their mental and emotional wellbeing. Finally, because the curve of sexual arousal in women is physiologically much slower than a man’s, women require more time and

³ Karol Wojtyła / John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willets (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 206–7.

⁴ Wojtyła / John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 197.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §2333.

tenderness for their feminine sexual desire to awaken.⁶ An honest appreciation of these genuine human differences, rooted in the natural law, can aid in a much deeper realization of God's design for human love.

What this very brief reflection reveals is that pastoral sensitivity does not require re-inventing the moral law, nor on the other hand is it enough to simply restate the "rules" without a deeper engagement with the genuine needs and longings of the human heart. Rather, a genuine pastoral approach moves with tenderness, which John Paul II describes as "the ability to feel with and for the whole person, to feel even the most deeply hidden spiritual tremors, and always to have in mind the true good of that person."⁷

Therefore, the virtue of prudence, the "charioteer" of the virtues, is absolutely necessary. Prudence requires first "a listening heart" (1 Kgs 3:9), so that one can prudently discern precisely what genuine human good (physical, emotional, spiritual) is missing from a person's life. It requires meeting souls in their hearts' deepest aches for love and beginning with an affirmation of those very longings as good and holy. Moreover, a failure to recognize real deprivations can leave souls feeling discouraged, stuck, or hopeless, as it seems that no one can understand their plight, or offer a pathway out of the struggle. Genuine attention to real human need can make the critical difference between persisting in virtuous living and giving up entirely while rationalizing the evil. Thus, a sound pastoral approach requires *greater* attention—not less—to the deepest aches and longings of the human heart.

Receive the Fullness of Sacramental Grace: Contemplation and Reception of Christ Crucified

But perhaps the most powerful pastoral secret of all arises in the often-overlooked final chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*, entitled "Lest the Cross Be Emptied of Its Power" (§§84–120). After responding to the various arguments of dissenting academics, he turns to what is perhaps the real reason that fuels such vehement dissent—these teachings are sometimes difficult to live out in practice, especially in the modern world. Recall our original question: "What am I to do, if remaining faithful is very difficult?" "What if I am afraid of what love will cost me?"

John Paul II's reply is again to turn to Christ, but this time to Christ crucified, because *it is through the Paschal mystery that divine love and grace ultimately fills the "gap."* To ignore the power of sacramental grace flowing

⁶ Wojtyła / John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 207, 272.

⁷ Wojtyła / John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 207.

from the Cross of Christ is to empty the Cross of its profound power. It is to reject *the very way* that Christ makes his “yoke easy, [his] burden light” (Matt 11:30). In one of the most interesting arguments of all, John Paul states:

[The] real secret of [the Church’s] educative power lies not so much in doctrinal statements and pastoral appeals to vigilance, as in constantly looking to the Lord Jesus. Each day the Church looks to Christ with unfailing love, fully aware that the true and final answer to the problem of morality lies in him alone. (*VS* §85)

Therefore, *prayerful contemplation, where the soul locks eyes with Christ crucified and recognizes his need for sacramental grace is the pastoral key to living out the perfection of Christian love.* There are several reasons why this is true. First, sin often arises from the twisting of authentic desire, and it is only in Christ that all human longing finds its true *telos*. Second, discovering how much one is loved by God is the wellspring from which to love others, especially in difficult moments. Third, recognizing one’s own need for mercy and forgiveness begins the pathway towards genuine repentance by seeking out sacramental grace.

At the same time, John Paul II reminds us that acknowledging human weakness

never means compromising and falsifying the standard of good and evil in order to adapt it to particular circumstances. It is quite human for the sinner to acknowledge his weakness and to ask mercy for his failings; *what is unacceptable is the attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified, without even the need to have recourse to God and his mercy.* (*VS* §104; emphasis mine)

Notice that, in the mind of John Paul, the moral life is woven within the Paschal mystery and *relies* on the dogmatic truth that all men stand in need of God’s grace. Proposing that morals can be wholly cut off from acknowledging the need for a sacramental sanctification is like saying that a branch can bear fruit while severed from the vine. “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 (Jn 19:34), that believers find the grace and the strength always to keep God’s holy law, even amid the gravest of hardships” (*VS* §103).

Prayer and sacramental grace are the keys to realizing the real possibilities of man amidst the concrete and often messy details of life:

Only in the mystery of Christ's redemption do we discover the "concrete" possibilities of man. 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 according to a balancing of the goods in question. But what are the concrete possibilities of man? And of which man are we speaking? 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. (*VS* §103; emphasis mine)

The moral life then, in a real sense, becomes the truest test of faith. Whereas *Veritatis Splendor* began with a commonly held error that one can have faith but reject certain moral teachings, John Paul II here comes full circle and demonstrates that those who make this argument in fact lack a true faith in the Cross of Jesus Christ. *Do we really believe that God has opened wide the channels of sacramental grace? Do we really believe that Christ has redeemed us?* Herein lies the profound union among faith, morality, and the sacraments. Faith, if it is real, must be lived, as a call to union with Christ by overcoming our weaknesses and loving those whom Jesus has given us to love. In a moral context, this means living the call to chastity both outside of marriage and also within it. This means fidelity to the vows one takes before God in living one's vocation. It means discerning the voice of God as he calls us to new and even daunting missions that aid in our own redemption and those of others, just as he called all the patriarchs to a deeper faith, obedience, and mission while all the while giving them the gift of his real genuine presence.

Thus, John Paul II concludes with the theme of biblical faith in Christ as the foundation for Christian morality:

It is urgent to rediscover and to set forth once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent. *Rather, faith is a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, a truth to be lived out; . . . it is not truly received until it passes into action, until it is put into practice.* Faith is a decision involving one's whole existence. It is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of

life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6). (*VS* §88)

In the end, the “gap” every person experiences when confronted with difficulty is not unusual. It is only a sign of his need for a savior, his need for sacramental grace, and his need to be needed on a glorious mission in God’s plan of redeeming the world. N.V