

The “New” Evangelization, Catholic Moral Life in Light of *Veritatis Splendor*, and the Family

WILLIAM E. MAY

*John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family
Washington, DC*

I WILL BEGIN by showing why a new evangelization is needed and summarizing what it means, and then focus on the intimate link between it and Catholic moral life. A centrally important document for understanding what a Catholic moral life entails is Pope John Paul II’s masterful encyclical of 1993, *Veritatis Splendor*. I will therefore focus on central themes of this great encyclical and show how the Holy Father relates the moral life to the new evangelization both in this encyclical and in other writings, especially in his 1988 apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*. I will end by summarizing John Paul’s thought on the evangelizing mission of the Christian family, particularly as set forth in his 1981 apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*.

I. The “New” Evangelization: Its Necessity and Nature

Fierce debates rage in our society over such issues as abortion, euthanasia, and “gay” marriage. I believe that cogent arguments can be and have been developed to show the truth of propositions such as: *It is always gravely immoral intentionally to kill innocent human persons; unborn children, whose lives begin at fertilization are human persons and therefore it is gravely immoral intentionally to kill them; it is utterly impossible for persons of the same sex to marry because they cannot do what married persons are supposed to do, etc.* The difficulty is that cogent arguments demonstrating the truth of these and other morally significant propositions frequently fail to persuade others. For instance, one could give arguments to members of the Planned Parenthood Federation to show that it is always wrong intentionally to abort unborn babies and not succeed in having them accept

the truth of this proposition. One could give strong arguments to members of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance to show why it is not possible for same sex couples to marry and fail to change their minds. The reason is that “whatever is received is received in the mode the recipient” (an old scholastic adage), and we make ourselves the kind of receivers we are by the choices that we make, preeminently by choices that can rightly be regarded as fundamental commitments.¹ Thus a person who has committed himself/herself to the way of life proposed by the Planned Parenthood Federation has made himself or herself the kind of person less capable of receiving the truth about the grave immorality of intentionally aborting unborn human life. What is needed is not an argument but a change of heart—a *metanoia*, a conversion, a new kind of fundamental commitment. That is why a new evangelization is needed.

The necessity and nature of this new evangelization has been a constant theme in the pontificate of John Paul II. Thus, for example, in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (November 1994), he proposed a special assembly of the Synod of bishops for each of the five continents (Africa, America, Asia, Oceania, Europe) to prepare for the new millennium, and these synods subsequently took place. In proposing them, he affirmed that “the theme underlying them all is *evangelization*, or rather the *new evangelization*,” whose “foundations had been laid down by Paul VI in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*” (no. 21, emphasis added). Earlier, in his 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II had declared: “I sense the moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a *new evangelization*” (no. 3; emphasis added). The Holy Father has made similar references to the imperative need of a new evangelization or “re-evangelization” again and again over the past 25 years. Calling attention to the loss of faith in the countries of the so-called First World, for example, he said in 1987: “Without a doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world” (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 34), and he insisted that “the entire mission of the Church . . . is concentrated and manifested in *evangelization*. . . . ‘To evangelize,’ writes Paul V I, ‘is the grace and vocation proper to the Church,

¹ On this see John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 71, where he cites a marvelous passage from St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *De Vita Moysis*, in which this great Father of the Church declared: “All things subject to change and to becoming never remain constant, but continually pass from one state to another, for better or worse. . . . Now human life is always subject to change; it needs to be born ever anew. . . . But here birth does not come about by a foreign intervention, as is the case with bodily beings . . . ; it is the result of free choice. Thus *we are* in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions.”

her profound identity'” (ibid, no. 33, citing Paul’s *Evangelium Nuntiandi*, no. 14). To evangelize in essence means to proclaim the good news of our redemption in Christ and to lead people to embrace him and to be united with him through baptism.

John Paul II emphasizes that lay men and lay women are called in a unique way to share in the work of evangelization by bearing witness to Christ and to his Church in the “world,” which is precisely “*the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation*. . . . The lay faithful, in fact [as Vatican Council II reminds us], ‘are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like a leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity, they manifest Christ to others’” (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 15, citing *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31). Laypeople, however, will be able to exercise properly the evangelizing task entrusted to them only if they “know how to overcome in themselves the separation of Gospel from life, to take up in their daily activities in family, work, and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel” (ibid. no. 34). They must open their doors, their hearts, to Christ (cf. ibid.) and “Put out into the deep for a catch!!!—*duc in altum*” (the major theme of *Novo Millennio Adveniente*). They must encounter Christ and “put on Christ.” And this leads us to consider the nature of Catholic moral life and its relationship to the “new evangelization” and, in particular, the indispensable role of laypeople in this ecclesial task.

II. Catholic Moral Life in Light of *Veritatis Splendor* and Its Relationship to the New Evangelization

1. Catholic Moral Life in Light of *Veritatis Splendor*

John Paul II himself identified the “central theme” of *Veritatis Splendor* as the “*reaffirmation of the universality and immutability of the moral commandments, particularly those which prohibit always and without exception intrinsically evil acts*” (no. 115). This reaffirmation was necessary insofar as so many of our contemporaries, including, unfortunately, a sizable and influential number of Catholic theologians, were claiming that norms such as those forbidding the intentional killing of the innocent, adultery, fornication, and the like were not absolute. According to them such norms admit “exceptions” whenever engaging in the acts they proscribe is necessary to achieve some alleged “greater good” or to avoid some alleged “greater evil.”

John Paul II’s reaffirmation of the universally binding force of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsically evil acts was needed; it constitutes,

as it were, the “first word” about living an upright moral life whether or not one is a Catholic. But this reaffirmation, as he himself makes clear in this great document, in no way constitutes the “last word” about Catholic moral life. It is in essence a “following” of Christ, a matter of becoming conformed to him.

The Holy Father insists on this. Indeed, in his introduction to the encyclical John Paul II calls attention to a truth of supreme importance for Catholic moral life. This is the truth, central, as he reminds us, to the teaching of Vatican Council II, that “it is only in the mystery of the Word Incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man. . . . It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father’s love” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 2, citing *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). Jesus, in his very person, “fulfills” the natural law, among whose universally binding norms are the moral absolutes whose “reaffirmation” was the “central theme” of the encyclical. Jesus does so by bringing the natural law to perfection and revealing to man his noble calling. Thus to live a Catholic moral life means to follow Christ; it is a “*sequela Christi*.” “Following Christ,” John Paul writes, “is the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality,” and following him involves “holding fast to the very person of Jesus” (no. 19). It means “becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the cross (cf. Phil. 2:5–8) (no. 21).

But how do we become conformed to Christ; how do we hold fast to his very person? One requirement is that we are to keep his commandments, and first of all the precepts of the Decalogue. John Paul II emphasizes that the “different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections on the one commandment about the good of the person, at the level of the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor, and with the material world” (no. 13). Indeed, “the commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man [who asks him what he must do to gain eternal life] are meant to safeguard the good of the person, the image of God, by protecting his goods. . . . The commandments thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbor, at the same time they are proof of that love. *They are the first necessary step on the journey to freedom*” (no. 13).²

The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, which is at the heart of the precepts of the Decalogue, had been given to the Chosen

² Here John Paul II simply articulates accurately the Catholic tradition as found in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, who centuries ago emphasized that “God is offended by us only because we act contrary to our own good” (*Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.122).

People of old (cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). But, as the Holy Father reminds us, Jesus has given us a new commandment. We are to love one another as *Jesus, who gave himself for us on the cross, loves us* (cf. Jn 15:12) (no. 20). Commenting on this new commandment, the Pope writes: "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. . . . Jesus asks of everyone who wishes to follow him: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Mt 16:24) (no. 20).

Moreover, the vocation to perfect love "is not," the Pope declares, "restricted to a small group. . . . *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 of neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, 'Come, follow me,' is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God" (no. 18).

John Paul II also underscores the truth that to follow Jesus and to love even as he has loved us by giving himself for us on the cross requires us to shape our lives in light of Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount and of the Beatitudes found in it. The Holy Father, following an ancient Christian tradition,³ declares that the Sermon on the Mount is the "*magna charta* of Gospel morality" (no. 15). Jesus calls us to be perfect, and the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount "speak of basic attitudes and dispositions in life." The Beatitudes are "*promises* from which there also indirectly flow *normative indications* for the moral life. In their originality and profundity they are a sort of *self-portrait of Christ*, and for this very reason are *invitations to discipleship and to communion of life with Christ*" (no. 16).

The Beatitudes, consequently, are not optional for the Christian. They describe the dispositions and attitudes that ought to characterize followers of Christ. The Beatitudes, rooted in the new command to love as Jesus loves, can be considered, as Germain Grisez has proposed, "modes of Christian response." They designate characteristics of Christians that inwardly dispose them to do only what is pleasing to the Father. They specify ways of acting that mark a person whose will, enlivened by the

³ See, for instance, St. Augustine, *The Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, I, 1; trans. John J. Jepson, SS, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, No. 5 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1948), 18–21. On the Sermon on the Mount as the *magna charta* of Christian ethics see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sister Mary Noble, OP (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 134–67.

love of God poured into his or her heart, is connaturally inclined to act with confidence, born of his or her Christian hope, that complete human fulfillment is realizable because of Christ's redemptive work.⁴

In considering Catholic moral life as a following of Christ John Paul II also shows the paramount importance of the Christian's *baptismal commitment* for that life. He reflects on this commitment in the section of *Veritatis Splendor* where he shows the fallacious reasoning of those who deny that we determine ourselves through our freely chosen actions and claim that we do so through an alleged act of "basic" or "fundamental" option at the core of the person different from and other than free choice. The Holy Father rightly repudiates this erroneous view; it has been responsible for the denial that one always commits *mortal sin* if one freely chooses to do what one knows to be gravely evil, for example, killing innocent persons, committing adultery, and similar deeds. However, he takes care to note that "[E]mphasis has rightly been placed on the importance of certain choices which 'shape' a person's entire moral life, and which serve as bounds within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop" (no. 65). He goes on to declare:

There is no doubt that Christian moral teaching, even in its biblical roots, acknowledges the specific importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is a question of the decision of faith, of the *obedience of faith* (cf. Rom 16:26) "by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals.'" This faith, which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6) comes from the core of man, from his "heart" (cf. Rom 10:10), whence it is called to bear fruit in works (cf. Mt 12:33–35; Lk 6:43–45; Rom 8:5–10; Gal 5:22) (no. 66; internal citations from Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 5 which in turn cites Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, Chap. 3; DS 3008).

Here the Holy Father is referring to our *baptismal commitment*, to our free choice (made for most of us in our name by our godparents and reaffirmed at various times in our lives, for instance, during the Easter vigil service) to renounce Satan and to follow Christ, to *be Christians, that is, to be other Christs in the world*.

This baptismal commitment is the fundamental choice or option of the Christian. In and through this choice, which henceforth "shapes the Christian's entire moral life and serves as the framework within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop"

⁴ See Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 627–59.

(*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 65), Christians freely take on the task and honor of sharing in Christ's redemptive work; through it they commit themselves to complete, in their own flesh, "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24).⁵

Speaking of baptism and Christian life elsewhere, John Paul II declared:

It is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life that comes from Baptism, the sacrament of faith, so that this knowledge can help that person live the responsibilities which arise from that vocation received from God. . . . *Baptism regenerates us in the life of the Son of God, unites us to Christ and to his body, the Church, and anoints us with the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples* (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 10).

2. The Relationship Between Catholic Moral Life and the New Evangelization

As we have seen, Catholic moral life is in essence a following of Christ, of inwardly conforming oneself to Christ, of committing oneself to be as perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect and to love even as Jesus loves us. It is a call to holiness, and this call is addressed to *all Christians*. Here I will focus on Catholic moral life and its call to holiness and to the indispensable role that Catholic laypeople are called upon to play in the work of the new evangelization.

John Paul II addresses this issue at greatest length in his 1988 apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*. There he emphasizes that the call to holiness, so eloquently expressed at Vatican Council II (see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31 and nos. 39–42, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*), is addressed to laypeople as well as to clergy and religious. Holiness is in fact "their fundamental vocation," and it "is not a simple moral exhortation but is an *undeniable requirement arising from the very mystery of the Church . . .*" (no. 16). The lay vocation to holiness "expresses itself in a particular way in *their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities*" (no. 17). This is so because "*the 'world' . . . [is] the place and means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation.*" Reminding laypeople of the teaching of Vatican Council II, John Paul II says:

He [God] entrusts a vocation to them [the lay faithful] that properly concerns their situation in the world. The lay faithful, in fact, [as Vatican Council II affirmed] "are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of

⁵ For a masterful development of these ideas, see *ibid.*, 551–71.

the gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own proper duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity, they manifest Christ to others.” Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is . . . in a specific way a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God (no. 15, citing *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31).

The “world” in which laypeople are summoned to find holiness and to evangelize is well described by Paul VI in *Evangelium Nuntiandi*, and John Paul II cites him at length in *Christifideles Laici*. Paul had said that this world is:

the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, and suffering. The more Gospel-inspired laypeople there are engaged in these realities, clearly involved in them, competent to promote them and conscious that they must exercise to the full their Christian powers which are often repressed and buried, the more these realities will be at the service of salvation in Jesus Christ, without in any way losing or sacrificing their human content but rather pointing to a transcendent dimension which is often disregarded (*Evangelium Nuntiandi*, no. 70; cited in *Christifideles Laici*, no. 23).

It is thus in the “world” that laypeople are called on to share in the ecclesial work of evangelization or rather, in view of the rendering of the “Christian fabric of society” (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, no. 34), of re-evangelization or of a new evangelization. Here the major responsibility of the lay faithful is “to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response . . . to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society” (no. 34). As we have seen, if the lay faithful are to do this work entrusted to them they must live a Catholic moral life and be holy. For “holiness must be called a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition for everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church” (no. 17).⁶

⁶ I have developed the role of laypeople in evangelization in my essay, “Evangelization: The Apostolate and the Personal Vocation of Laymen and Women,” in *The Church’s Mission of Evangelization: Essays in Honor of the Most Reverend Agostino Cacciavillan*, ed. William E. May (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University, 1996), 265–86.

III. The Indispensable Role of the Christian Family in the New Evangelization

John Paul II addressed the indispensable role of the Christian family most fully in one of his earliest apostolic exhortations, namely in *Familiaris Consortio*, promulgated on November 22, 1981. John Paul II himself identified this document as a “*summa* of the teaching of the Church on the life, the tasks, the responsibilities, and the mission of marriage and of the family in the world today.”⁷

The third and longest part of this document considers in depth the “role of the Christian family in the world today,” and it contains four major sections: (1) building a community of persons; (2) serving life; (3) participating in the development of society; and (4) sharing in the life and mission of the Church. The fourth section, in which John Paul develops magnificently the idea of the Christian family as the “domestic church,” contains three subsections, devoted to (1) the family as a believing and evangelizing community—its prophetic role; (2) the family as a community in dialogue with God—its priestly role; and (3) the family as a community at the service of man—its kingly role. Of these subsections the one immediately relevant to our concerns is the first, devoted to the Christian family as a believing and evangelizing community.

The Christian family shares in Christ’s prophetic mission “by welcoming and announcing the word of God” (no. 51). Thus the first requirement of Christian spouses and parents is faith, because “only in faith can they discover and admire with joyful gratitude the dignity to which God has deigned to raise marriage and the family, making them a sign and meeting place of the loving covenant between God and man, between Jesus Christ and his bride, the Church” (no. 51). The driving force of the Christian family is the love specific to spouses, but Christian spouses know through faith that their love is a sign and real participation in the love of God and in his redemptive power. God, who through faith “called the couple *to* marriage, continues to call them *in* marriage” (no. 51). “In and through the events, problems, difficulties, and circumstances of everyday life, God comes to them, revealing and presenting the concrete ‘demands’ of their sharing in the love of Christ for his Church in the particular family, social, and ecclesial situation in which they find themselves” (no. 51).

Faith thus heard and experienced in love makes the Christian family a fire that sheds its light on many other families (cf. no. 52). This prophetic mission of the family, John Paul II emphasizes, is the dynamic

⁷ John Paul II, Address of December 22, 1981, in which the Pope presented the new apostolic exhortation.

expression of its inner identity; the family carries this mission out by being faithful to its own proper being as a community of life and love: The “apostolic mission of the family is rooted in baptism and receives from the grace of the sacrament of marriage new strength to transmit the faith, to sanctify and transform our present society according to God’s plan” (no. 52).

The Pope notes two characteristics of the prophetic apostolate of the family. First of all, it is exercised within the family itself by encouraging and helping family members to live fully their Christian vocation. Wisely, the Holy Father notes that “just as in the Church the work of evangelization can never be separated from the sufferings of the apostle, so in the Christian family parents must face with courage and great interior serenity the difficulties that their ministry of evangelization sometimes encounters in their own children” (no. 53). In addition, this prophetic and evangelizing apostolate, begun within the family itself, includes the “task of defending and spreading the faith, a task that has its roots in baptism and confirmation, and makes Christian married couples and parents witnesses of Christ ‘to the ends of the earth,’ missionaries, in the true and proper sense, of love and life” (no. 54). One form of this missionary activity, John Paul II observes, “can be exercised even within the family. This happens when some member of the family does not have the faith or does not practice it with consistency. In such a case the other members must give him or her a living witness of their own faith in order to encourage and support him or her along the path toward full acceptance of Christ the Savior” (no. 54).

This, then, is the evangelizing role John Paul II assigns to the Christian family.

IV. Conclusion

There is an intimate bond between Catholic moral life, understood as a *sequela Christi*, a call to holiness, and a summons to be faithful to our baptismal commitment and the work of the “new evangelization.” Laypeople in particular have the sacred mission of bringing the truth and good news of Jesus’ saving death and resurrection to the secular world in which they live their lives. They are called to be “other Christs,” to be his vicarious representatives in the world of everyday life. If they are true to their call they will indeed be a “light to the nations,” people who bring others Jesus’ own self-giving love.