

The Splendor and Gift of the Christian Moral Life: *Veritatis Splendor* at Twenty-Five

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I RECALL READING *Veritatis Splendor* for the first time. It was the fall of 1993 in Stanley Hauerwas's graduate seminar on theological ethics. Hauerwas had led his students through Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Barth, as well as contemporary figures such as Gene Outka and Alasdair MacIntyre. Hauerwas's approach cannot be easily summarized without falling into caricature, but it is safe to say that the course centered on the role of character and virtues as they were lived out within the particular narrative and practices of the Christian community, the ongoing witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹ There was an extended argument that the universalizing project of the Enlightenment had stripped Christianity of its graced message and stripped ethical discourse of its intelligibility. At the end of that seminar, he assigned Pope John Paul II's recently promulgated *Veritatis Splendor*. Although Hauerwas's approach diverges at points from the Catholic tradition expressed in the encyclical, there remain significant points of agreement: the encyclical was a clarion call for a robust renewal of moral theology grounded in the encounter with Christ's call to "come, follow me," an encounter to be lived out concretely in the Church up to the point of martyrdom. The encyclical, furthermore, situated immediate disagreements about moral teachings within

¹ For a summary of Hauerwas's thought in his own words, see *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

problematic trends in modern thought that, among other errors, placed freedom in opposition to law and truth.

Twenty-five years later, after having studied and taught *Veritatis Splendor* on many occasions, I have taken up the encyclical again for consideration. The encyclical as a whole manifests a unity of a number of themes that has not always been appreciated. The current article aims to highlight how the splendor of *veritas* in its manifold forms illuminates the entire encyclical and, more importantly, sheds light on the entire moral life of the Christian community. While interweaving philosophical threads into its theological considerations, Pope Saint John Paul II works and thinks through the realities of the moral life as revealed by God as Creator and Redeemer. Since the encyclical has been the object of thorough study and argument over the past twenty-five years,² rather than a summary of the scholarly discussion or an engagement with particular points of controversy, I have opted to mark the encyclical's twenty-fifth anniversary by offering reflections on central themes that might be of particular benefit to the next generation of theologians and students in the collective pursuit of the ongoing renewal of moral theology.³ The splendor of truth is a multi-layered splendor, illuminating faith and reason, freedom and law, conscience and morality, sin and mercy, and Creator and creation. Because of this, the splendor of truth resists attempts at separation or reduction.

This article will consider the splendor of truth as manifested in a sevenfold splendor. Each individual splendor considers a different insight of John Paul II's encyclical. The article proceeds in seven hierarchically descending sections that each highlight an aspect of the splendor of the Christian moral life seen through the lens of gift. In offering an account of what makes the moral life intelligible and achievable, the order of these seven steps described here begins with the gift of God's revelation in Christ and then moves to show how such a life should be received by particular members of the people of

² See the extensive bibliography on *Veritatis Splendor* at the end of this article, including many such responses, expositions, and analyses. The bibliography was compiled by my graduate assistant, Aaron Henderson.

³ Readers looking for a comprehensive treatment of the encyclical's background, key themes, and controversies should examine Servais Pinckaers, O.P., "An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis Splendor*," trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology: Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars*, ed. J. A. DiNoia, O.P., and Romanus Cessario, O.P. (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999), 11–72.

God in particular acts so as to recognize their true happiness, with the ongoing gift of mercy for failure along the way as the necessary concluding element.

First, the article considers the priority of divine revelation for understanding the moral life. Second, it addresses the specification of that divine revelation in the lived history of the incarnate Word, he in whom the law is perfectly fulfilled and who offers himself as the perfect gift of self. Third, the article addresses the role of faith as the decisive acceptance of that perfect gift in Christ, an acceptance that then grounds the moral life. Fourth, it looks at both the natural law and the divine law as God's creative and redemptive acts, respectively, that allow the redeemed human creature, as part of the ecclesial Body of Christ, to identify and move along the path to true happiness. Fifth, it considers the role of conscience as the intelligent judgment of the person encountering and living out the moral law. Sixth, the article considers how such judgment leads to concrete gifts of self—or specific moral acts—that are recognizable precisely as moral acts by their specific objects. Seventh, having descended through each step from the highest view of divine revelation in general, the article concludes with the splendor of mercy, in which the gift of Christ's redemption is offered continually to each person in anticipatory realization of the fullness of God's kingdom.⁴

⁴ Cardinal Pio Laghi briefly summarizes the structure and unity of the document: "As you know, the Encyclical is composed of three chapters, each with a specific character: the first one is 'Biblical,' centered on the dialogue of Jesus with the 'rich young man' (Mt 19:16); the second is 'doctrinal,' in which the problem of the discernment of some tendencies of contemporary moral theology is addressed in a language which at certain points is technical; the third is 'pastoral,' concerned with indicating the consequences of this reflection for the concrete life of the Church and the world. Notwithstanding this apparent diversity in literary genre, the document in its entirety has a profound interior unity. A kind of unifying element pervades the whole document and assures its solidity. It is the fundamental question of the relationship between freedom and truth, or better, in Christ's own words: 'You will come to know the truth and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32). So much so that the title of the Encyclical, instead of *Veritatis Splendor*, could be *Libertatis Splendor*" ("The Impact of *Veritatis Splendor* on Catholic Education at the University and Secondary Levels," *The Thomist* 60, no. 1 [1996]: 1–18). Richard McCormick, who disputes the encyclical's depiction of proportionalism, contrasts the "beautiful Christ-centered presentation" in chapter 1 with the "dense and technical" character of chapter 2 as "an in-house conversation" ("Killing the Patient," in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, ed. John Wilkins [Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994], 14–20).

The seven sections are connected by the theme of the gift: the gift in itself, the reception of the gift, and the use of the gift. The first two sections, revelation and the specification of revelation in Christ, belong to the gift in itself. Faith, law, and conscience, the middle three sections, have to do with our acceptance of the gift. Then the final two sections, specific moral acts and mercy, pertain to our use of the gift. The present article will serve as a prism that aims to highlight the spectrum of truths at work in the encyclical and how, together, they form an unbroken and radiant splendor of the gift that is the Christian moral life.

The Splendor of Divine Revelation

The encyclical shows forth the splendor of revealed truth that is at the heart of the human being's pursuit of happiness. This is true in terms of the ground of the intelligibility of the Christian moral life, insofar as appeals need to be made to divinely revealed truths in Christ in order to discover the fullness of the truth about how to live well. This is also true in terms of the content of the Christian moral life, insofar as its very existence is not an achievement based on human effort, but rather needs to be received as a gift from God. The emphasis on the priority and necessity of divine revelation, however, in no way diminishes the intelligibility of the created order with its natural tendencies and inclinations.

Veritatis Splendor presents an admittedly complex view of human reason and its need for divine revelation. The encyclical frequently repeats the role of and need for divine revelation to assist human beings in coming to know the truth of the moral life. It seems the encyclical offers an implicit distinction concerning reason: what human reason is capable of knowing when functioning in its full operation versus a narrowed human reason along rationalist and empiricist models (§112). There is a strong emphasis on the inadequacy of reduced visions of reason to address questions about the moral life. The term "revelation" occurs twenty-nine times; "reveal" twenty-eight times; and "divine wisdom" seven times. Before we address particular questions about human reason, let us consider the various ways in which the document highlights that the shape of the moral life is inextricably outlined by divine revelation.

As its subtitle indicates, the encyclical seeks to address fundamental questions about the Church's moral teaching and does so from the perspective opened up by divine revelation. Notice the way in which

the encyclical situates the meaning and truth of moral action within the divine *oikonomia*: “It is [Christ the Teacher] who opens up to the faithful the book of the Scriptures and, by fully revealing the Father’s will, teaches the truth about moral action. At the source and summit of the economy of salvation, as the Alpha and the Omega of human history (cf. Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13), Christ sheds light on man’s condition and his integral vocation” (§8). The truth about moral action must be situated within who man is and who he is called to become. The reference to “man’s condition and his integral vocation” places moral action within the drama of creation, fall, redemption, and glory. The encyclical describes the moral life as a following of the incarnate Lord: “The way and at the same time the content of this perfection consist in the following of Jesus, *sequela Christi*, once one has given up one’s own wealth and very self” (§19). It is not merely that the way Christians follow the moral life is inspired by Christ’s example of moral excellence. Following Christ is both “the way” to and “the content” of this perfection embodied in the Church.⁵ Once the Word has taken on human nature, the way to and content of human nature’s perfection is now something objectively and necessarily “in Christ.”

Depicting the moral life as a *sequela Christi* confronts and completes rational human inquiry in different ways depending on the tenor of the inquiry.⁶ Christ is now the norm of human nature. The norm disclosed in Christ perfects and completes much that was found in

⁵ Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explains the importance of this moral excellence derived from following Christ: “A Christianity that is no longer a common way of life, but simply proclaims an undetermined ideal, would no longer be the Christianity of Jesus Christ and his immediate disciples. . . . Therefore, it is the enduring task of the Church to be a community of ‘the Way’ and to show forth in the concrete the way of right living. The words of the Psalm, ‘You have made known to me the paths of life,’ stand significantly in the first address which an apostle made, in the Pentecost preaching of St. Peter (Acts 2:28). The Church must always show forth ‘the Way’ by reason of her very being. She must make the moral content of faith ever newly visible” (“Christian Faith as ‘The Way’: An Introduction to *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Communio* 21 [1994]: 199–207, at 200).

⁶ Lorenzo Albacete affirms the importance of the *sequela Christi* in *Veritatis Splendor*: “The theological concept of the *sequela Christi* is thus the interpretative key to the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. This doctrine is at the heart of the entire first chapter of the encyclical, and this chapter is, I believe, the interpretative key to the entire encyclical” (“The Relevance of Christ or the *Sequela Christi*,” *Communio* 21 [1994]: 252–64, at 252).

the best of moral teachings found in philosophical and religious traditions. The encyclical affirms: “In this witness to the absoluteness of the moral good *Christians are not alone*: they are supported by the moral sense present in peoples and by the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West, from which the interior and mysterious workings of God’s Spirit are not absent” (§94). Yet, the norm disclosed by Christ necessitates a profound rejection of much secular thinking about the moral life that tends to equate human nature with empirically observable trends in human behavior. Such empiricist approaches fail to discern the encounter of the individual person before the moral law. As such, they cannot be elevated to participate in the revelation of that moral law in the person of Jesus Christ. The encyclical specifically critiques the behavioral sciences for contradictory tendencies to, on the one hand, downplay the role of human freedom and, on the other hand, argue from the observations of a variety of customs and institutions to the false conclusion of “a relativistic conception of morality” (§33). Rational inquiries must remain open to the revealed truth about God. Otherwise, moral norms become products of human making instead of discoveries of the human person as created, that is, in relation to the Creator.

As previously suggested, when the encyclical refers to the necessary role of human reason, it gently corrects a false vision of autonomous reason and places human reason as receptive of the truths revealed by faith. The encyclical thus explains the basic understanding of moral theology as inextricably theological:

The Church’s moral reflection, always conducted in the light of Christ, the “Good Teacher,” has also developed the specific form of the theological science called “*moral theology*,” a science which accepts and examines Divine Revelation while at the same time responding to the demands of human reason. Moral theology is a reflection concerned with “morality,” with the good and the evil of human acts and of the person who performs them; in this sense it is accessible to all people. But it is also “theology,” inasmuch as it acknowledges that the origin and end of moral action are found in the One who “alone is good” and who, by giving himself to man in Christ, offers him the happiness of the divine life. (§29)

The reason here described is a reason open to theological truths at both the natural and supernatural level. In this sense, it is “accessible

to all people” as long as they do not use their reason in a self-limiting manner that would deny the ability of reason to know the truth about the human person, the world, and the Creator who made both. This does not necessarily imply that people must have already used their reason to come to these truths, but it would be a false reading of this text to put reason on one side and revelation on the other as though revealed claims must stand before the judgment seat of a secularized reason. Reason operates within moral theology by seeing the inner intelligibilities of the orders of creation and redemption. The encyclical grounds reason within its illumination by revelation: “Man is able to recognize good and evil thanks to that discernment of good from evil which he himself carries out by his *reason*, in particular by his *reason enlightened by Divine Revelation and by faith*” (§44). The origin and end of moral action are in God—God not only revealed in Christ, but God who has acted definitively in giving himself to man in Christ. The Christian moral life is a life responding to this gift: “The Christian, thanks to God’s Revelation and to faith, is aware of the ‘newness’ which characterizes the morality of his actions” (§73). The “newness” stems from the reality that the human being has been liberated from sin and made a child of God by grace. The encyclical does not shy away from affirming the necessarily supernatural context of the Christian moral life, but rather presents the splendor of its supernatural character.

The encyclical critiques a false rationalism that would eliminate revelation from intelligent reflection on the moral life. Human reason properly leans on supernatural revelation and should acknowledge “the dependence of human reason on Divine Wisdom and the need, given the present state of fallen nature, for Divine Revelation as an effective means for knowing moral truths, even those of the natural order” (§36, citing *Humani Generis*). The opposition here is not between some varieties of fideism and rationalism, but between a reason that can recognize truths of the natural order when illumined by faith and a reason that excludes divine revelation. When the latter occurs, human reason becomes a pseudo-reason by claiming an undue authority: “Some people . . . have actually posited a *complete sovereignty of reason* in the domain of moral norms regarding the right ordering of life in this world” (§36). The encyclical here emphasizes that human reason both needs and depends on truths revealed by God. Whatever the legitimacy of appeals to human reason or to finding truths that are recognizable to all human beings (described in §36), these cannot form the basis of an exclusion of divine revelation.

The framework of *Veritatis Splendor* is the divine truth as it exists in itself and in the created world. The truth thus could not be reduced to human reason, since it has its source in the one true God. Truth is not equated with human reason, but rather truth is reason's proper object, as human reason discovers truth within the world by means of both natural reason and revelation. The encyclical affirms the goodness of divine revelation by showing how it articulates a recognizable path for human flourishing. Divine revelation is not merely some awareness of transcendence or general religious experience; it includes specific cognitive dimensions. The encyclical thus critiques the "denial that there exists, in Divine Revelation, a specific and determined moral content, universally valid and permanent" (§37). To exclude such content from revelation would mean that "the word of God would be limited to proposing an exhortation, a generic *parae-nesis*, which the autonomous reason alone would then have the task of completing with normative directives which are truly 'objective,' that is, adapted to the concrete historical situation" (§37). Human reason plays a role in receiving and communicating divine revelation, but never based upon what human reason can know without revelation. Revelation illumines human reason with specific truths about Jesus Christ and his commandments; revelation centers on the person of Christ and in the content of that revelation. The encyclical deftly avoids false dichotomies between interpersonal and propositional accounts of revelation. Propositional truths of revelation are, at least in part, what allow for personal communion with the Triune God.

The encyclical turns to the character of divine revelation when it defends the "intransigence" of the Church's moral teaching in the face of contemporary criticism about her alleged failure to adapt to the trends of modern society. As has been shown, the moral teachings of the Church are not properly the result of autonomous human reason, but rather the fruits of reason operating within a receptive mode to divine revelation.⁷ The true good and authentic freedom

⁷ Some place the authority of the Church in opposition to individual moral judgment. Jean Porter suggests that relying too strongly on ecclesial authority can undermine the capacity for moral judgment, a capacity necessary for a "humane moral community." She argues further that the Church is not a consistently reliable guide with respect to morality: "At any rate, we cannot rely on the Catholic church, or on any other institution, to offer an interpretation of the norms of morality that will always safeguard 'the inviolable personal dignity of every human being'" ("Moral Reasoning, Authority, and Community in *Veritatis Splendor*," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 15

of the human person will “not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God’s eternal wisdom, which we have received in Christ, and as a service to man, to the growth of his freedom and to the attainment of his happiness” (§95, citing *Familiaris Consortio*, §34). The Church may not change her teaching, since her teaching is not properly her own. The encyclical’s vision of the human person and the accompanying moral norms are not those achieved by human effort, but are “received in Christ” from “God’s eternal wisdom.” The encyclical continues to fix the gaze of the Church on Jesus Christ. There is a marked absence of a tendency to translate moral norms into secular language or into rational justifications.⁸

The priority of divine revelation does not merely cover the overall scope of morality and the content of morality. Divine revelation extends all the way down to specific actions. The analysis of the human act will be necessarily incomplete apart from an openness to divine revelation. The encyclical does not hold that human actions are unintelligible apart from revelation, but that their full understanding is revealed in the light of faith: “The *morality of acts* is defined by the relationship of man’s freedom with the authentic good. This good is established, as the eternal law, by Divine Wisdom which orders every being towards its end: this eternal law is known both by man’s natural reason (hence it is ‘natural law’), and—in an integral and perfect way—by God’s supernatural Revelation (hence it is called ‘divine law’)” (§72). Revelation discloses “in an integral and perfect

[1995]: 201–19, at 215). On the contrary, if the Christian moral life is at every stage characterized by divine gift, such a dichotomy (between the magisterium and individual moral judgment) cannot obtain. For, the Church receives the teaching of Christ as a gift and hands it on in its integrity to her members. This gift elevates and complements the gift of reason given to human beings by which they make moral judgments.

⁸ Russell Hittinger observes that the encyclical consistently combats a secularized reading of the natural law: “Once again, what the pope has to grapple with in this respect is not only decades of neglect *ad intra*, where the theme of natural law was detached from the fundamental principles of theology, but also the history *ad extra*, where natural law and natural rights betokened that ground of liberty in which men find themselves under no mundane authority. This secular myth, which was developed as a counter to Genesis, is contrary to the most fundamental principles of Christian theology” (“*Veritatis Splendor* and the Theology of the Natural Law,” in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 97–128, at 119–20).

way” the authentic good that guides the morality of human actions. The adjectives “integral” and “perfect” ensure that the revealed law does not evacuate the natural order. Once the authentic good is fully seen via revelation, the always already present natural good is also seen more clearly. The encyclical shows that the integrity of the natural order is not something that easily reveals itself to human experience. On the contrary, our understanding of ourselves and of the world witnesses to a broken dimension of human life. The encyclical observes, “reason and experience not only confirm the weakness of human freedom, they also confirm its tragic aspects” (§86). Because of this history of weakness and tragic rebellion, the fundamental ordering of the human person to God that is the natural moral law is most clearly affirmed in the acceptance of the revelation of God’s salvific actions in Jesus Christ.⁹

By opting for a message grounded in divine revelation, the encyclical maintains its evangelical mission in service to the new evangelization. Such an evangelical outlook is crucial for understanding the document, since it does not offer a more stringent moralism. Such an approach would not serve the encounter with Jesus Christ that alone is saving. Moreover, the challenge is to present that encounter to people who live in societies that already have a surface-level acquaintance with the message of Christianity or with its visible institutions. A particular problem with post-Christian cultural attitudes is that people may have heard of a handful of individual Christian beliefs but have not yet embraced them as the truth and so lived in accordance with their transforming power. The encyclical presents this mission of moral teaching within the new evangelization as follows: “Just as it does in proclaiming the truths of faith, and even more so in presenting the foundations and content of Christian morality, the new evangelization will show its authenticity and unleash all its missionary force when it is carried out through the gift not only of the word proclaimed but also of the word lived” (§107).

Two aspects merit particular notice. First, the new evangelization consists in sharing the truths and content of Christian faith and morality. Although the encounter with Jesus Christ is primary, the

⁹ Germain Grisez observes that the encyclical makes frequent reference to God’s word in Scripture as divine revelation and to how this is communicated through the Church: “Once again, the Pope’s critique finally invokes revelation” (“Revelation versus Dissent,” *The Tablet* 247 [October 16, 1993]: 1329–31, at 1330; repr. in Wilkins, *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 1–8).

way of this encounter treads the path of intelligible content about who he is, what he has done, and how he asks us to live. Second, the new evangelization is a gift. It is something grounded in the divine mission of the Church. As Christ and the Holy Spirit are given for our salvation, the Church is the extension of that same gift. Certain divine mysteries may be known only by divine revelation; divine revelation, moreover, offers genuine access to those same mysteries and harmoniously helps demystify the natural order as well. Since Christ is the definitive revelation of God, his own gift of self necessarily guides a full understanding of the moral life.

The Splendor of Christ

The encyclical offers a profound call to preach Jesus Christ and to make him known in the world: “Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, we must not be content merely to warn the faithful about the errors and dangers of certain ethical theories. We must first of all show the inviting splendour of that truth which is Jesus Christ himself” (§83). As will be shown, the encyclical itself often practices what it preaches by consistently presenting the splendor of Christ.

In the context the of the realities of law and freedom and the current tendencies to see these in opposition, the encyclical teaches that it is Christ’s gift of self alone that fulfills the law and perfects human freedom. What exactly does this mean? His fulfillment of the law allows us to enter into the commandments as a path to perfection (§15). Christ’s own gift of self invites us likewise to enter imitatively into a new gift of self. Perfection is the perfection of the gift of self. It is important not to think of Christ’s fulfillment of the law in an ahistorical manner, as though human reason might attain an understanding of the fulfillment of the law apart from the *oikonomia*, the historical economy of salvation. After describing the Sermon on the Mount as the “*magna carta* of Gospel morality,” the encyclical shows that this perfection cannot become a rationalistic ideal: “Christ is the center of the economy of salvation, the recapitulation of the Old and New Testaments, of the promises of the Law and of their fulfillment in the Gospel” (§15). Christ accomplishes his fulfillment of the law in a specific historical time and place. He fulfills not only the natural law, but the natural law as it is revealed and manifested in the Old Law and as communicated in the New Law. To center all things on Jesus Christ does not detract from or lessen in any way the natural or old laws. When Christ recapitulates the Law and the Prophets, he anchors their meaning more significantly in their prefiguring role.

The encyclical thus continues: “Jesus himself is the living ‘fulfillment’ of the Law inasmuch as he fulfills its authentic meaning by the total gift of himself: *he himself becomes a living and personal Law*, who invites people to follow him; through the Spirit, he gives the grace to share his own life and love and provides the strength to bear witness to that love in personal choices and actions (cf. Jn 13:34–35)” (§15). All historical times and places are now transformed by the gift of self that is Jesus Christ. The encyclical describes this perfection in the language of the gift of self: “Perfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called” (§17).¹⁰ The gift of self, however, is not a moralistic replacement for the Gospel, but rather a shorthand for participating in Christ’s gift of self. The law is the call to give oneself to God and to neighbor. The height of human freedom is not merely the absence of restraint, but the freedom to give oneself to another, first of all to God, who alone can make a proper claim on the love of one’s whole heart, mind, and strength.

The emphasis on the *sequela Christi* can offer the illusion that Christ is but another moral teacher or that he is an exemplary member of the genus of moralists. The encyclical, however, presents Christ’s crucifixion as an irreducibly theological act in which Christ offers himself in charity to the Father for the love of neighbor: “*The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; he lives it fully in the total gift of himself* and calls his disciples to share in his freedom” (§85). Thus, when the encyclical teaches that “following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality” (§19), it is helpful to recall that Christ often spoke of the need for his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. To follow Christ is to receive

¹⁰ Janet Smith offers an insightful analysis of the manner in which *Veritatis Splendor* incorporates the personalist language of self-gift and the dignity of the human person within the Aristotelian/Thomistic language of metaphysics, law, and virtue in “The Universality of the Natural Law and the Irreducibility of Personalism,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 4 (2013): 1229–47. Christopher Thompson argues that the emphasis on personalism is inadequate unless it is understood apart from broader metaphysical considerations and an objective good that guides the moral life: “Any moral theologian who wishes to take ‘the perspective of the acting person’ seriously, then, must also be willing to take up the task of helping people ‘acknowledge their sins, so that [they] can move beyond the state of image-restoration, which entails sorrow and conversion, to that of image-perfection, which is the state of general freedom’” (“Moral Theology in a Sapiential Mode: *Veritatis Splendor* and the Renewal of Moral Theology” *The Thomist* 65 [2001]: 465–73, at 473, here citing Romanus Cessario, “Moral Absolutes in the Civilization of Love”).

first the gift that he has given, the gift of his own self-offering. This is why the encyclical speaks of the way in which the moral teachings of the Bible are perfected in Christ: “The moral prescriptions which God imparted in the Old Covenant, and which attained their perfection in the New and Eternal Covenant in the very person of the Son of God made man, must *be faithfully kept and continually put into practice* in the various different cultures throughout the course of history” (§25). The precepts of the Old are not merely taught more perfectly in the New. Rather, while indeed having been taught more perfectly in the New, they attain their true perfection in the very person of the Word incarnate. Once the moral teachings are perfected in Jesus Christ, they cannot be set aside, but must be kept faithfully across different historical settings. The reception of the Old Law’s moral teachings forms a necessary part of the entrance into the New Covenant. The New Covenant here is more than the document of the New Testament, which gives witness to the New Covenant. The New Covenant is fulfilled and perfected in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This deepens, and thus changes, the entire perspective of the moral law.¹¹ To consider the distinctiveness of Christian morality is not to look at specific instances of teachings unique or original to Christianity. Instead, the distinctiveness of Christian morality centers on the fulfillment of the Law: it has already been fulfilled perfectly in Jesus Christ. The moral life no longer is the product of human effort, but is received as a gift.¹²

¹¹ Livio Melina writes: “In the encounter with Jesus, desire is saved from its withdrawal into itself and lifted up toward a goal, in which one can find fulfillment in a form heretofore unknown. Christian revelation proposes a surprising and superabundant fulfillment of the desire for happiness; and this resolves the paradoxical tension between the necessity of finding an answer for living and acting reasonably and the impossibility of full satisfaction of this desire in this world” (“Desire for Happiness and the Commandments in the First Chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*,” in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 143–60, at 153).

¹² J. A. DiNoia emphasizes the priority of the divine initiative in Jesus Christ: “The principal message of the encyclical lies in this: without the mysteries, morals do not make ultimate sense. In the Christian vision of things, we can understand the significance of human action only within the context of the prior divine action. It is only in the perspective of the divine invitation to ultimate communion and the concrete initiation of this communion in Christ that the full significance of morality can be experienced and understood” (“*Veritatis Splendor: Moral Life as a Transfigured Life*,” in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 1–10, at 10).

The encyclical situates the call to follow Christ within the character of the gift of Christ already given. This makes the ability to follow Jesus possible, since the ground of its possibility has been opened in his death and resurrection. The encyclical expresses the point in stages: “*Following Christ* is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being” (§21). As if recognizing that this expression is unclear, it continues to describe the marvelous manner in which we are invited to be conformed to Christ, who in turn dwells in us. Thus, the only way we can be conformed to him is when he lives in us. His obedience, his love, is the ground of our renewed existence, the ground of our discipleship and our following of him. The encyclical thus continues: “Being a follower of Christ means *being conformed to him* who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (cf. Phil 2:5–8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (cf. Eph 3:17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord” (§21). The identification with Christ forms a radical renewal of the person: “By the work of the Spirit, Baptism radically configures the faithful to Christ in the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection” (§21). The encyclical then quotes Augustine’s words to the newly baptized: “Give thanks for we have become not only Christians, but Christ. . . . Marvel and rejoice, we have become Christ!” (§21).¹³

The moral life must be received as a gift, the gift of nothing less than Christ’s very own self-offering. Consequently, as creatures called into fellowship with their Creator who reveals himself to be their loving Father, any response less than perfect love is inadequate for the gift’s reception. The encyclical therefore indicates that awareness of sin accompanies the awareness of the moral law in its reference to Jesus’s disciples’ question “then who can be saved?” and to Jesus’s response: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:25–26). *Veritatis Splendor* develops the theme that the impossible—perfect love—becomes possible in Christ: “To imitate and live out the love of Christ is not possible for man by his

¹³ DiNoia offers this summary of the encyclical: “One of the overriding objectives of *Veritatis Splendor* is to affirm that the Christian moral life makes sense only with this understanding of our calling to ‘life on high in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 3:14). . . . As the encyclical makes clear, this transformation will be a conformation: the more we become like Christ, the more surely do we discover our true selves, the unique persons created by the triune God to share in the divine life and to enjoy the family life of the Trinity” (“*Veritatis Splendor*: Moral Life as a Transfigured Life,” 2).

own strength alone. He becomes *capable of love only by virtue of a gift received*" (§22). The law calls for perfect fulfillment, but such fulfillment is made possible only in Christ: "We are speaking here of a *possibility opened up to man exclusively by grace*, by the gift of God, by his love" (§24). The encyclical emphasizes that this is a gift of God to be received: "Precisely the awareness of having received the gift, of possessing in Jesus Christ the love of God, generates and sustains *the free response* of a full love for God and the brethren" (§24). It is not a generic gift of God in creation or human reason; the gift of God is Jesus Christ and the perfection of the love of God found in his person through his death and resurrection. The necessary role of revelation and Christ, who, in his person, teaching, and work, is God's definitive revelation, leads to the role of faith, which is the graced response of the human creature to divine revelation. Once divine revelation is accepted in faith, faith then becomes the foundation of an authentically Christian moral life.

The Splendor of Faith

The encyclical never shies away from emphasizing the necessary role of faith in the Christian moral life. Faith is not an embarrassment to ethical considerations, but rather forms the context in which the overall integrity of the moral life may be understood. The encyclical calls for greater emphasis to be placed on faith as part of a renewal of the Church: "In order to carry out her prophetic mission, the Church must constantly reawaken or 'rekindle' her own life of faith (cf. 2 Tim 1:6), particularly through an ever-deeper reflection, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, upon the content of faith itself. The 'vocation' of the theologian in the Church is specifically at the service of this 'believing effort to understand the faith'" (§109). As seen earlier, the encyclical gently reminds the reader that faith is an act infused with particular content. There are truths that faith communicates to the human race as part of its salvation. Faith is a saving reality when we cling to God as the first truth and when our intellectual embrace of the truth of his revelation is moved by charity. The encyclical exhorts its readers to recover the splendor of that same faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ gives himself completely to the Father and to us. For us to be in Christ and to receive the gift of his fulfillment of the law, we must turn completely to him, and so go through him, in the Spirit, to the Father. This turn to God impacts our entire being, or it is no turn at all. In an interesting manner, the encyclical makes some positive use of the language developed from the erroneous posi-

tion held by proponents of a fundamental option in morality.¹⁴ The encyclical rejects as false the approach to the moral life that separates out a fundamental option at the transcendental level of the subject from specific moral acts in the subject's categorical engagement with the world (§65). While rejecting the erroneous fundamental option theory, the encyclical calls for the person's fundamental commitment to Christ. Without this commitment, there may not be any discussion of Christian morality. More specifically, the encyclical speaks of the fundamental commitment of faith:

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.'" (§66, citing *Dei Verbum* §5)

The moral life thus engages the full person before the fullness of reality, which necessarily includes God. A decision must be made about what is ultimately true, good, and beautiful. This decision is carried out with the full intelligence and will of the human person. Faith, then, is that decision in favor of the God who reveals himself as the Creator and Savior. The encyclical's use of the word "faith" here includes the threefold virtues of faith, hope, and love, in which faith perfects the intellect and hope and charity perfect the will. This holistic usage of faith describes the fullness of the creature's relationship before the Creator in the New Covenant.

The document places great emphasis on the existential commitment, both intellectual and voluntary, of the person in response to the God who reveals. The encyclical presents the importance of the person's decision before the fullness of reality encountered in God. Moral theology thus cannot be reduced to teachings apart from the divine Teacher, and as we will see later, the divine Teacher cannot

¹⁴ See William Mattison, "Veritatis Splendor and the Fundamental Option: Seeking Guidance from Thomas' Doctrine of Infused Cardinal Virtue," in *Reason and the Rule of Faith: Conversations in the Tradition with John Paul II*, ed. Christopher J. Thompson and Steven A. Long (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 143–58.

be separated from his specific teachings. The encyclical focuses on the need of each person to turn to Christ: “*People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil.* Christ is the Teacher, the Risen One who has life in himself and who is always present in his Church and in the world” (§8). The reference to turning to Christ “once again” shows that this exhortation is first offered to the Christian faithful and perhaps to those in societies of a formerly Christian orientation. The crisis of morality goes beyond dissent from specific moral teachings. The widespread phenomena of dissent and indifference about moral teachings are rather symptoms of a more general loss of the sense of the intrinsic relevance of the Christian faith. Faith is above all a conversion, a turning from falsehood to truth, from false idols to the true icon of God, Christ (Col 1:15), from the way of death to the way of life. The encyclical encourages the faithful to consider Christ once more and to renew the decision to follow him.

The moral life is the response of each person to the invitation of God to enter into covenant with him by living in faithful obedience to his revelation. This invitation is addressed to each person to enter into the unity made possible in Christ. The covenant is neither individualist nor collectivist, since it is the realization of the call to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. There is one covenant with God so that, as one, we may become his people. The encyclical emphasizes this call to covenantal faith by showing that the Decalogue is more than a list of commandments, but rather comes with the introduction “I am the Lord your God” (§66). The commandments in this manner form an interpersonal context of a listening and attentive relationship, and indeed, a relationship recalling to memory the actions of God’s redemptive love (e.g., “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt”).¹⁵ The encyclical argues

¹⁵ In short, the Decalogue ought to elicit from us a response. God says, “I am the Lord your God,” and to him we say, “and we are your beloved people.” Servais Pinckaers comments on the Decalogue in the context of *Veritatis Splendor*: “The Decalogue is not simply a list of commandments demanding obedience under pain of sin and punishment; it is a gift of God’s Goodness, a manifestation of his Wisdom and Holiness. And here is the decisive point: more than legal obedience, the Decalogue requires of us a response of love, a love that will take on the twofold form of love of God above all and love of neighbor; these in turn are refracted into the precepts of the first and second tables” (“The Use of Scripture and the Renew of Moral Theology: The *Catechism* and *Veritatis Splendor*,” *The Thomist* 59 [1995]: 1–19, at 6).

that “the morality of the Covenant” receives “its aspect of completeness, unity and profundity” from the decision to listen to “the Lord your God” (§66). This decision in favor of God impresses “upon the numerous and varied particular prescriptions their primordial meaning” (§66). What does such an affirmation mean? Consider the way in which the human mind grasps a form, the form of a living being, when it sees that all of the various parts are not simply conglomerated together, but each belong to a larger whole. In this way, the parts of the Decalogue remain and may be considered and discussed on their own, but this is to consider a part without the whole, similar to the dissection of an animal, in which true knowledge is acquired, but not the true knowledge of the living animal as a whole. The primordial meaning of the Decalogue is the confession “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut 6:4). The individual commandments describe parts of the proper relationship of the human creature to its Creator and to its neighbor. Taken together, however, they reveal a God who is both Creator and Redeemer and the nature of a people in covenantal relationship with him, a relationship that may be entered only by way of a decision. The encyclical emphasizes this decision: “Israel’s fundamental decision, then, is about the fundamental commandment (cf. Jos 24:14–25; Ex 19:3–8; Mic 6:8)” (§66). Faith is the commitment of the person to recognize the truth about God and to live in accord with his ways. The idea that faith could somehow ignore human morality is alien to the biblical revelation.

The decision-laden character of morality continues in the fulfillment of the promises to Israel in Jesus Christ: “The morality of the New Covenant is similarly dominated by the fundamental call of Jesus to follow him” (§66).¹⁶ Without reducing morality to a voluntarist expression of arbitrary law, as we will see later in the treatment of the natural law, the encyclical reiterates the role of the fundamental decision to follow Christ: “The Gospel parables of the treasure and the pearl of great price, for which one sells all one’s possessions, are eloquent and effective images of the radical and unconditional nature of the decision demanded by the Kingdom of God” (§66).

¹⁶ See David Cloutier’s and William C. Mattison III’s broad review essay “Method in American Catholic Moral Theology after *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2012): 170–192. Among many other observations, they point out that moral theology after *Veritatis Splendor* typically approaches moral reflection within the scope of revealed Christianity and of the universal call to holiness.

Christian morality finds its form or shape in this radical and unconditional decision to follow Christ. This commitment and call to follow Christ is not only moral but also sacramental, and it reveals the moral dimension of the Christian's baptismal vow to follow Christ unconditionally.¹⁷

The encyclical seemingly never tires of repeating this evangelical appeal. Human freedom is "real but limited," and it "belongs to us as creatures; it is freedom which is given as a gift" (§86). Freedom exists for a purpose, which is to say "yes" to God: "Within that freedom there is an echo of the primordial vocation whereby the Creator calls man to the true Good, and even more, through Christ's Revelation, to become his friend and share in his own divine life" (§86). To become friends of God and sharers in the divine life! This is a gift that could never be achieved by mere human effort, even if we had not fallen into sin. God has shared his life with us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We may follow the path that Christ has carved into the middle of human history through his death and resurrection.

The Christian moral life, then, is a response to the creative and salvific actions of God in Jesus Christ. One might say that the Christian moral life is a gift of self now possible in Jesus's perfect gift of self. The purpose of freedom is revealed in Jesus: "Jesus reveals by his whole life, and not only by his words, that freedom is acquired in *love*, that is, in the *gift of self*" (§87). Freedom is the ability to give oneself to another. Freedom thus must respect the reality of "the other" as something beyond merely the projection of my will. The erroneously exalted view of freedom that would turn the subject's freedom into the creator of values prevents a true gift of self, since all moral actions would be an imposition of self upon others. The

¹⁷ William E. May comments on this same section of *Veritatis Splendor*, §66: "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' (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 65), Christians freely take on themselves the task and honor of sharing in Christ's redemptive work" ("The 'New' Evangelization, Catholic Moral Life in Light of *Veritatis Splendor*, and the Family," *Nova et Vetera* [English] 2 [2004]: 393–402, at 398–99).

encyclical is not content simply to express this truth of the human person's dignity before others, but elects to consider it within the new view of reality opened by the mystery of the Incarnation and the crucifixion: "Contemplation of Jesus Crucified is thus the highroad which the Church must tread every day if she wishes to understand the full meaning of freedom: the gift of self in *service to God and one's brethren*" (§87). The gift of self is possible as a fulfillment of the law.

The encyclical here wishes to confirm not only that morality needs faith but also that faith needs morality.¹⁸ The radical opposition between freedom and truth is "the consequence, manifestation and consummation of *another more serious and destructive dichotomy, that which separates faith from morality*" (§88). Such a privatized "faith alone" mentality would result in a dissolution of Christian morality into the majority trends of contemporary society (§4). Under this worldliness, faith is no longer transformative, but rather "is weakened and loses its character as a new and original criterion for thinking and acting in personal, family and social life" (§88). The encyclical expresses concern that decision making now occurs by criteria drawn from "a widely dechristianized culture," criteria that are "extraneous or even contrary to those of the Gospel" (§88). A faith separated from morality would cease to be the Christian faith. The encyclical urges that "Christians should rediscover *the newness of the faith and its power to judge* a prevalent and all-intrusive culture" (§88). The power of the faith must allow Christians to offer a "yes" to this and a "no" to that.¹⁹

Faith necessitates a submission to the authority of God who speaks. This submission is not enslaving, since it is the full purpose of freedom. Faith that does not listen or obey is not true faith. Faith

¹⁸ Cardinal Laghi frames the false opposition between faith and morality as the theological aspect of the crisis of morality: "A crisis which has developed, as regards fundamental moral theology, around two aspects of the present culture: a) the more philosophical aspect, leading to the claim of human autonomy in the area of morality, beginning with the discussion of freedom and truth; b) the more theological aspect, that is, the loss of awareness of the authentic relationship between faith and moral conduct" ("The Impact," 7).

¹⁹ John Finnis quips that "faith, not sex, is the theme of *Veritatis Splendor*" ("Beyond the Encyclical," in Wilkins, *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 69–76, at 69). Finnis argues that an ever greater reform of ecclesial preaching and practice is needed to renew faith: "Only robust faith in the revelation consummated in the life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus, and transmitted by the apostles, will sustain the hope for the heavenly kingdom and for some share in it" (75). Without disagreeing, one might add that the good news is, in part, that human realities such as sex participate in this robust faith.

necessarily includes a moral dimension; faith is “a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a *truth to be lived out*” (§88). The encyclical critiques the separation of faith and morals as something that prevents human beings from truly encountering Christ in their lived existences. A lived knowledge includes the fullness of Christ and his commandments. Just as the faith may not be separated from morality, morality may not be separated from faith. Both include an existential commitment on the part of the human creature before the whole of reality, both created and uncreated, as disclosed in divine revelation.

The act of faith as existential commitment before the whole of reality may not be separated from the daily life of the believer. The encyclical affirms that “faith is a decision involving one’s whole existence” (§88). As we have seen so many times, the encyclical steadfastly resists reductionist trends in modern thought that make faith and morality merely inner dispositions of the subject before transcendental values or projections on a world bereft of meaning. Instead, Christian faith and morals center on the person of Jesus Christ. The encyclical describes faith as “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 (cf. Jn 14:6)”: “It entails an act of trusting abandonment to Christ, which enables us to live as he lived (cf. Gal 2:20), in profound love of God and of our brothers and sisters” (§88). To deprive faith of a specific moral content would be to deprive faith of its transformational reality. Faith would no longer be capable of offering a renewed life. The encyclical affirms that faith “possesses a moral content” and that, “through the moral life, faith becomes ‘confession,’ not only before God but also before men: it becomes witness” (§89). Faith finds its splendor in the life of discipleship to the Master. Such a life of discipleship finds its expression in the laws by which the Creator calls his creatures back to himself.

The Splendor of Law

Perhaps the greatest source of the contemporary crisis in morality is from the widely shared view that law opposes freedom. Such an understanding shares an anthropocentric view placing the human subject and human experience at the center of the universe, rather than God. The relationship between law and freedom requires a proper understanding of the reality of the human person as a creature coming from and called to return to God. The encyclical describes its purpose as reflecting “on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching” in light of a

crisis about morality both inside and outside the Christian community. Dissents from particular teachings are placed within a larger context of dissent from the foundations of the moral teaching of the Church. The encyclical summarizes the problem as follows: “At the root of these [anthropological and ethical] presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to the truth” (§4). The encyclical develops this point by affirming that “certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to *exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values*” (§32). One of the chief burdens of the encyclical is to rescue an understanding of human freedom from this false exaltation so that it may serve the purpose for which human freedom was intended.

Drawing on the rich young man’s question before Christ, the encyclical highlights the need to understand freedom in its proper connection to the truth, to the good, and to the law: “*The question of morality, to which Christ provides the answer, cannot prescind from the issue of freedom. . . . But what sort of freedom?*” (§34). Genuine freedom is found in the status of the human person as made in the image and likeness of God (§34). This way of grounding freedom in the image of God works to identify God as the source and end of human freedom. To be free is to be made in the image of God; to be free is not to enjoy limitless choice without a purpose, but to see that one’s freedom will be perfected in coming to know and to love God. Grounding freedom in the image of God also rejects a problematic trend in modern thought that wrongly considers freedom as something realizable apart from God. A proper understanding of freedom instead depends upon a proper, theological metaphysics: created freedom is not uncreated freedom; the freedom of the creature is distinct from, yet dependent on, the freedom of the Creator.

The distinction between the Creator and creation becomes the key to understanding the proper role of human freedom and its intrinsic ordering to the good. The encyclical quotes Sirach 15:14, “God left man in the power of his own counsel” (§38, citing *Gaudium et Spes* §17). Since this is interpreted in light of the image of God, man’s dominion is a “*sharing in God’s dominion to which man has been called*” (§38). Here the encyclical discusses the relationship between freedom and law, a troubled relationship in much of modern thought as a result of Kant’s obsession with the autonomous, or self-legislating, self and the accompanying separation of morality from human inclinations to happiness, as well as from human (and revealed) traditions of moral

wisdom. Rather than merely condemning autonomy, however, the encyclical attempts to recover a “rightful autonomy” from its false exaggerations. The rightness or wrongness of autonomy turns on its ability to recognize the Creator. This means more than simply the ability of the human person to admit something greater than oneself to which one might submit. Rather, to recognize the Creator is to recognize the being whose perfection of existence and sheer actuality is the source and cause of all created perfections and actualities. The encyclical reaffirms the centrality of this proper metaphysics when it closes this section with a reference to the Augustinian teaching of *Deus semper maior*, God ever-greater (§57). The encyclical avoids the tendency in modern theology, however, to replace this ever-greater-ness of God with an over-stated apophaticism that would deny our ability to know concrete truths about God and his plan for our salvation. God’s majesty, instead, is cause for a great love of his revelation and for “the holiness of the law of God” (§41).

In defending a rightful autonomy, the encyclical speaks of “*theonomy*, or *participated theonomy*” (§41). Theonomy holds an equipoise between a false exaggeration of autonomy, on one side, and heteronomy, on the other. Theonomy recognizes that the law comes from God, but also that the entire existence of the human creature comes from God. Modernity’s false understanding of autonomy seeks to make the human being independent of God’s gift of existence. The encyclical affirms that “*the autonomy of reason cannot mean that reason itself creates values and moral norms*” (§40). The proper autonomy of the human creature receives the enabling gift of God’s law. Such obedience is not correctly described as “heteronomy,” because God’s law does not violate human reason and human will. There is no reduction of the law to the power of the will, as the encyclical states that God’s law is “an expression of divine wisdom.” The law is not arbitrary, but discloses the necessary paths for the human creature to participate in the harmonious order of the whole. When the human person submits to the law as coming from God, “freedom submits to the truths of creation” (§41).

The law is irreducibly theological.²⁰ Recognizing this ensures

²⁰ *Veritatis Splendor*’s account of law safeguards law’s theological character. With respect to the natural law, Russell Hittinger comments: “It is important to understand that the problem is not simply the application of natural law to this or that issue in moral conduct (e.g. contraception), but what the natural law is in the first place. Whereas the classical theological position situated natural law within the economy of divine laws, some contemporary theologians hold

that human reason does not become a separate starting point of the moral law, but sees itself in relation to the moral law of the provident Creator. Here there is an explicit affirmation of the “Thomistic doctrine of natural law” (§44).²¹ The central emphasis in this affirmation is to exclude a reduction of the natural law to autonomous human reason. Instead, human reason and its orientation to the moral good in the natural law is rooted in divine reason. Quoting Leo XIII, the encyclical teaches: “The natural law is *itself the eternal law*, implanted in beings endowed with reason, and inclining them *toward their right action and end*; it is none other than the eternal reason of the Creator and Ruler of the universe” (§44). Similarly quoting Aquinas, it teaches that “the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law” (§43). In these quotations, the ability of human reason to know good and evil is framed within God’s providential ordering of creation. The moral life is thus not an act of rebellious independence, but an intelligent and voluntary participation into the moral order.²²

that natural law denotes the human practical reason. Once the natural law is equated with the human power to make practical judgments, its specifically legal character as a received (or participated) law is muted, if not abandoned” (“Natural Law as ‘Law’: Reflections on the Occasion of *Veritatis Splendor*,” *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 39 [1994]: 1–32, at 11).

²¹ The encyclical elsewhere affirms that it does not impose “any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one” (§29). Nonetheless, its central teachings on law, freedom, and moral action are expressed in an irreducibly Thomistic approach.

²² Herbert McCabe suggests that the encyclical would have been more faithful to Aquinas’s moral teaching by attending more to virtues and less to conscience and laws: “The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* is, in great part, an attack on those who want to read the rule book as through it were a training manual by those who want to read the manual as though it were a rule book. Neither seems to have adverted to the fact that they are logically quite different kinds of discourse. The rule book, for example, is about individual acts, whereas the manual is about how to acquire dispositions” (“Manuals and Rule Books,” in Wilkins, *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 61–68, at 63). McCabe, however, also affirms that there can be no training in dispositions without certain rules that make the practice. No stranger to the need for language of virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre observes: “One central moral and theological lesson of the encyclical is that without understanding of and obedience to God’s law, we become self-frustrated beings” (“How Can We Learn What *Veritatis Splendor* Has to Teach?” in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 73–97, at 93). MacIntyre continues at this same place to observe the real problem that confronts the moral life when theologians fail properly to

Once the natural moral law is recognized as properly theological, it is easy to see how the natural law relates to the divinely revealed laws of the Old and New Testaments. As reason discovers the moral law in its historical encounter with the world, human beings, and God, it also finds a heightened moral law in its historical encounter with the graced revelation of God in his covenant with Israel and in Christ. The reception of the law by Israel was an occasion of joyful remembrance: “Israel was called to accept and to live out *God’s law* as *a particular gift and sign of its election and of the divine Covenant*, and also as a pledge of God’s blessing” (§44). Many of the Psalms express this gratitude for the gift of the law and exhort the people to meditate on the law and keep it (§44). The attitude of the Church imitates this joyful remembrance: “The Church gratefully accepts and lovingly preserves the entire deposit of Revelation, treating it with religious respect and fulfilling her mission of authentically interpreting God’s law in light of the Gospel” (§45). What distinguishes Israel and the Church from those outside of God’s covenants is the remembrance of the gift of God’s law. For Israel, it is the remembrance of the Torah. For the Church, it is the remembrance of Jesus Christ, who fulfills the Old Law in the New Law.

Drawing on the Thomistic explication of the New Law, the encyclical shows how the New Law is primarily “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2), the Holy Spirit dwelling in the hearts of the faithful (§45). It explicitly remarks that the emphasis in this present context is to show how all the laws, natural and revealed, Old and New, have “one and the same God” as their author and “support each other and intersect” in the accomplishment of God’s plan for men and women “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (§45; citing Rom 8:29). The revealed laws thus do not diminish human freedom or human reason, but rather allow the human person to reach fulfillment by sharing in the perfect love of God as manifested in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In order to maintain the theological orientation of the moral law and the accompanying anthropological implications, the encyclical

communicate God’s law: “Yet if this is so, if, that is to say, both our moral lives and our philosophical enquiries are bound to be ultimately frustrated unless we are able to learn what the Gospel has to teach, then it would be tragic and seeming paradoxical if what interposed itself between us and the Gospel, obscuring what the Gospel has to say about these errors, was some aspect of the discipline of Catholic moral theology.”

cal emphatically rejects the reduction of the natural moral law to so-called “laws” of human behavior as seen through the lenses of the empirical sciences. Though true norms, moral norms are not empirical norms of typical behavior among human societies. Thus contrasting empirical norms and their development to a discovery of the truth of moral norms, the encyclical states:

In fact, while the behavioural sciences, like all experimental sciences, develop an empirical and statistical concept of “normality,” faith teaches that this normality itself bears the traces of a fall from man’s original situation—in other words, it is affected by sin. Only Christian faith points out to man the way to return to “the beginning” (cf. Mt 19:8), a way which is often quite different from that of empirical normality. Hence the behavioural sciences, despite the great value of the information which they provide, cannot be considered decisive indications of moral norms. (§112)

Here there is a realism about the fallen condition of the human race. Since human action and behavior share in the alienation from God, from our neighbor, and from ourselves, the mere observation of typical human behavior will not amount to a proper understanding of the law that truly frees the human person. Even were human beings capable of seeing the moral law in its clarity, such perspicacity would not be enough for them to live in accord with its demands. It is not enough to know that “in the beginning, it was not so”; one needs to find the way to return to the beginning. The way to the beginning is provided only by the Christian faith. The natural law is thus illumined by the gift of the New Law: the natural law began to be fulfilled in the Old Law; both were fulfilled in the New Law. One finds human flourishing and happiness not via empirical studies, but in the drama of salvation history (see §45).

The encyclical addresses the notion of the development of moral doctrine from the perspective of the economy of salvation history.²³

²³ Christopher Kaczor offers an overview of John Paul II’s understanding of the development of doctrine across his teachings, but with a focus on *Veritatis Splendor*, in “John Paul II on the Development of Doctrine,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 4 (2013): 1173–92. He writes: “John Paul summarizes that authentic development does not involve a contradiction to the truths explicated in previous centuries. Even if truths need to be reformulated and re-expressed, they remain substantially the same” (1188).

Moral doctrine may experience development in a manner analogous to the development of doctrine of the faith (§28). Unfortunately, for the modern listener, the language of development typically connotes a sense of substantial change. When one speaks of a development, one is often thinking of a change. “Can the Church develop its teaching on X?” is often thought to be synonymous with “can the Church change its teaching on X?” The theological usage of “development,” however, is an argument for continuity and an argument against evolution of teaching. To explain that the current teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in his day were the same as the teaching of the apostolic Church was the burden of Cardinal Newman’s argument for development. The encyclical places the development of teaching in the context of the spirit-filled contemplation of the Word incarnate. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ offer a fixed form of divine revelation that may not be superseded, but only deepened in the receptive understanding of the Church.

In other words, the encyclical employs the notion of development to argue for the immutability of the natural law. What is one and the same may need, nonetheless, better formulations:

There is a need to seek out and to discover the most adequate formulation for universal and permanent moral norms in the light of different cultural contexts, a formulation most capable of ceaselessly expressing their historical relevance, of making them understood and of authentically interpreting their truth. This truth of the moral law—like that of the “deposit of faith”—unfolds down the centuries: the norms expressing that truth remain valid in their substance, but must be specified and determined ‘*eodem sensu eademque sententia*’ in the light of historical circumstances by the Church’s Magisterium, whose decision is preceded and accompanied by the work of interpretation and formulation characteristic of the reason of individual believers and of theological reflection. (§53)²⁴

²⁴ After the quote from Vincent of Lerins, this section cites both Trent’s *Dei Filius*, ch. 4, and Pope John XXIII’s opening address to the Second Vatican Council. The extended quotation here helps to show also that there is no opposition between the authoritative decisions of the magisterium and the theological reflection proper to individual believers. Underlying some objections to *Veritatis Splendor* is an erroneous notion of the Church. Richard McCormick perceives that “the issue behind other issues” in the encyclical is ecclesiology: “The primary context of *Veritatis splendor* is the Church. Here the encyclical is

The Latin expression here means “in the same sense and in the same meaning” and is a quote from Vincent of Lerins’s *Commonitorium Primum*, a fifth-century document concerned to show that new formulations did not entail innovations in the conciliar creeds and teachings. If the Church’s teachings could change at will, then they would simply be the results of human inquiry. Instead, the power of the Church’s message is that “Christ is the ‘Beginning’ who, having taken on human nature, definitively illumines it in its constitutive elements and in its dynamism of charity towards God and neighbor” (§53).

Here there is a reference to St. Thomas’s teaching on moral norms in *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 108, a. 1: “St. Thomas bases the fact that moral norms, even in the context of the New Law, are not merely formal in character but have a determined content, upon the assumption of human nature by the Word” (§53, note 98). This is fascinating to consider. The encyclical offers a metaphysical as well as a historical argument for the immutability of the natural law as taught by the Church. Because the human person is created in the image and likeness of God, there is a universality and immutability to the way that the human creature may return to God via love of God and neighbor. Simultaneously, because the Word has assumed a human nature and lived and taught among us, the law’s universality and immutability have now been inscribed in a particular historical place and time.

The treatment of law illumines a distinct approach to the bodily dimension of human life. Law is an act of reason, but it is not self-creating reason. Instead, the natural law is rational because it flows from the divine reason in the providential ordering of creation. God, however, did not merely create the human soul, but created the human person, body and soul. Thus, the body shares in the rational disposition of the natural law as an expression of divine and human

linked . . . with a pyramidal, noncollegial ecclesiology. . . . For me, *Veritatis splendor* is a symbol of a notion of the Church—the Church as a pyramid where truth and authority flow uniquely from the pinnacle” (“Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Theological Studies* 55 [1994]: 481–506, at 505–6). On the contrary, the pronouncements of the magisterium are “preceded and accompanied by the work of interpretation and formulation characteristic of the reason of individual believers and of theological reflection” (§53). Further, far from rejecting the Second Vatican Council’s ecclesiological vision, John Paul II adverts often to the Council and considers his work to be at the service of its proper implementation, as evinced by his citation of Pope John XXIII’s opening address.

reason. The encyclical eschews the contemporary tendency to see the body as “a raw datum” that the inner subject may reconfigure at will (§48). There is a unity of body and soul by reason of which the moral life of the human person finds expression not merely in the physical body, but in the moral body, the body taken up into the rational soul. Moral actions involving the body do not use the body as an independent instrument. There is a strong emphasis on the unity of the body and soul to avoid the charge of “physicalism” occasionally made against the Church’s teaching of the natural law (§47). To give an example, to hug a loved one who is grieving is an embodied act of love and compassion. It is radically inadequate to describe such a moral act in its physical dimensions of placing arms around a person at such-and-such an angle and applying so many pounds of pressure. The natural law is the law proper to that rational embodied soul. It is not a description of a neutral physical body in action subsequently overlaid with moral significance. The encyclical describes this unity of body and soul in terms of both the gift of self and the natural law, since these are but two parallel manners in which the encyclical sees the moral dimension of the human person. Using the language of self-gift, the encyclical teaches that “the person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator” (§48). Explained in the language of natural law, “the true meaning of the natural law can be understood: it refers to man’s proper and primordial nature, ‘the nature of the human person,’ which is *the person himself in the unity of soul and body*, in the unity of his spiritual and biological inclinations” (§50). Here the citation is to *Gaudium et Spes* §51, and so corrects a false reading of *Gaudium et Spes* that would separate its personalist approach from the natural law approach employed in teachings on sexual ethics. The proper understanding necessitates a harmony between the emphasis on the person and the natural law, since the nature of the human person is to be embodied. The body discloses the soul. It is not raw material to be manipulated. The human being, however, does not rest in a proper understanding of the moral laws informing and guiding embodied moral acts. The moral law is a law to be lived out and encountered in and through individual and concrete acts. Knowledge of the law thus works through the judgment of conscience as the human person acts either in accord with or in opposition to the objective law.

The Splendor of Conscience

Veritatis Splendor returns conscience to the realm of judgments about truth. It is no longer situated within the free will as though it were simply what the individual decides is right for him or herself. Just as there is a theoretical reason by which the person makes judgments of truth about the nature of reality, so there is a practical reason by which the person makes judgments of moral truth about how to live in response to the nature of reality. The error of the separation of conscience from truth finds strong rejection here: “Conscience is no longer considered in its primordial reality as an act of the person’s intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now” (§32). Conscience describes the ability of the human person to act as a moral agent—not only to know universal moral truths, but to act in accord with those truths in the given particularities of each day.²⁵

The need for one’s conscience to judge in accord with the truth forms the basis of the critique of a “‘creative’ understanding of moral conscience” (§54).²⁶ Although the encyclical does not use the explicit terminology, one might summarize its teaching by saying that it rejects a “creative” conscience and affirms a “created” conscience. Once the human person recalls its status as a creature with a certain orientation to the Creator, then the illusion of conscience as a realm in which moral values are imposed upon the world disappears.²⁷

²⁵ Ratzinger considers the first part of conscience, *synderesis*, as a mode of *amane-sis* or “primal remembrance of the good and the true . . . a tendency of man, who is created in the image of God, to tend toward that which is in keeping with God” (“If You Want Peace . . . : Conscience and Truth,” in *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian McNeil [New York: Crossroad, 2006], 75–100, at 92; originally published as “Wenn du Frieden willst, achte das Gewissen jedes Menschen: Gewissen und Wahrheit” in 1992, a year before *Veritatis Splendor*).

²⁶ Brian Johnstone observes that, when the encyclical rejects a “creative” conscience, it is not rejecting the “creative” role that conscience may play within particular societies when human laws contravene the natural law, a phenomenon that might be observed in the witness against unjust laws such as racial segregation and abortion: “What is rejected in the encyclical is an exaltation of freedom, such that conscience could itself constitute the moral law, instead of discerning the objective law and submitting to it” (“The Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*,” *The Ecumenical Review* [1996]: 164–72, at 169).

²⁷ Reinhard Hütter offers a helpful distinction between seeing freedom as a given, versus as a gift. When freedom is seen as a gift, “genuine freedom denotes the truthful enactment of created existence”; see “(Re-)Forming

Instead, there is a distinction between the decision and the judgment of conscience: “In their desire to emphasize the ‘creative’ character of conscience, certain authors no longer call its actions ‘judgments’ but ‘decisions’: only by making these decisions ‘autonomously’ would man be able to attain moral maturity” (§74). Conscience is not properly a decision, but a judgment. A decision implies an act of the will. In this limited understanding, conscience would then merely choose this or that action. Yet, how then could the conscience be good or evil? There needs to be a judgment of the truth about moral actions: “I will do this action because it is good,” or “I will not do this action because it is bad.” Without such judgments about the truth of moral good and evil, the human being would not be capable of moral agency.

There cannot be, then, a proper notion of conscience that would separate universal norms from concrete moral actions. The universal moral truth is judged through the particular moral action. One concretely affirms that adultery is wrong by choosing to be faithful day in and day out in a marriage. It is nonsensical to say that one affirms that adultery is wrong in the abstract while committing adultery in the concrete. Nonetheless, this is a view that the encyclical deems worthy of criticism:

In order to justify these positions, some authors have proposed a kind of double status of moral truth. Beyond the doctrinal and abstract level, one would have to acknowledge the priority of a certain more concrete existential consideration. The latter, by taking account of the circumstance and the situation, could legitimately be the basis of certain *exceptions to the general rule* and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. . . . On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called “pastoral” solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium. (§56)

The encyclical is not here addressing cases of moral weakness when individuals fail to act in accord with what they know to be right. Instead, here is a rejection of any ethical theories—even if “pastoral” in intent—that would judge acts to be good in particular cases while

Freedom: Reflections ‘after *Veritatis Splendor*’ on Freedom’s State in Modernity and Protestantism’s Antinomian Captivity,” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001): 117–61, at 119.

the law prohibits the same acts as evil in general.²⁸ Such a confused view of conscience implies a false view of the concrete experience of the individual. The experience of the human person as a moral agent depends upon the ability of moral truths to guide actions. The erroneous view, here described as supposedly “pastoral,” would separate human beings in their concrete existence from moral truth. This would be the opposite of genuine freedom. It is the binding character of moral truths that frees the human person; the person discovers but does not create the law.

Since conscience is ordered to the truth as part of the human person’s creation by God, conscience is also necessarily theological. The conscience is the *vox Dei* or “the witness of God himself, . . . the sacred place where God speaks to man” (§58). Such an emphasis on conscience as the voice of God is not meant in a subjective sense that would allow persons to claim God’s support for their various actions. “God told me to do it” remains an inadequate excuse for immoral behavior. The teaching is that conscience is theological in the objective sense. It has its origin and end in God’s creative and redemptive actions toward the human race. When one obeys the moral law, one obeys the author of that law; when one disobeys the moral law, one disobeys the author of that law. Since human beings are rational agents, they do not simply follow God’s providential order by instinct, as do non-rational animals. Instead, they form judgments about the nature of the world and how they should act in that world. Conscience covers the judgment of the practical reason about the application of universal moral norms in particular situations. The encyclical shows how law and conscience work together: “Whereas the natural law discloses the objective and universal demands of the

²⁸ Peter Black and James Keenan summarize a related, and problematic, view of conscience in which universal moral laws cease to function in their guiding role as part of conscience because the norms themselves are constantly under revision: “The laity, like moral theologians before them, realize that norms are constantly being reinterpreted, modified, and edited. . . . In conscience they examine the applicability of these norms and finally shape their judgments through *epikeia* in which finally well-articulated norms engage the specific circumstances of the situation whose demands they must respond to. . . . This in sum is the entire project of those who have advocated for an autonomous morality in the context of faith” (“The Evolving Self-Understanding of the Moral Theologian: 1900–2000,” *Studia Moralia* 39 [2001]: 291–27, at 319). Such a view of conscience rearticulates the “‘creative’ understanding of the conscience” rejected by the encyclical.

moral good, conscience is the application of the law to a particular case. . . . Conscience thus formulates *moral obligation* in light of the natural law” (§59). It is important that one not misread this in a wooden manner that would imply temporally distinct judgments about the universal demands and the application to a particular case. Instead, it is more adequate to describe the process by saying that moral acts express moral judgments about the good in this particular situation, such as “I will not steal this fruit from the grocery store” or “I will smile at my children even when I am tired after work.” That is to say, the moral action expresses the reality that the human person may act in a way that is not merely an expression of instinctual behavior, but a proper act of a person capable of knowing good and evil.

The judgment of conscience in particular cases may not be set in opposition to universal moral norms. It is precisely in relationship to moral norms and objective moral goods that conscience possesses a moral dimension. The encyclical thus explains: “The universality of the law and its obligation are acknowledged, not suppressed once reason has established the law’s application in concrete present circumstances” (§59). In this context, conscience is seen as “*the proximate norm of personal morality*” within the truth of God’s law, natural and divine, which is “*the universal and objective norm of morality*” (§60).²⁹ This distinction affirms the dignity of conscience in such a way that an erroneous conscience may be binding, even while conscience “*is not an infallible judge*” (§62). If conscience is clearly fallible, should it be binding? This is easier to explain when one steps outside of the judgment of the good to be sought and considers other questions of truth. In the case of mathematics, it is easier to see that there is a universal and objective norm governing mathematical truth. None-

²⁹ Johnstone asserts a questionable contrast between personalist and natural law interpretations of conscience within magisterial teaching: “Where Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16) focuses on the personal dimension of conscience and the dignity of the person, the encyclical stresses the act and the objective law” (“The Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*,” 170). This criticism assumes a dichotomy between the existential experience of the person acting and the particular actions in which one engages. It is sufficient to note here that the overcoming of such a dichotomy is one of the central goals of *Veritatis Splendor*. Richard Spinello offers a helpful analysis of the continuity between *Gaudium et Spes* and *Veritatis Splendor* in which he shows how the Latin text of *Gaudium et Spes* §16 includes the necessary role of law and truth in the exercise of conscience (“Pope John Paul II on Conscience,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, August 2009).

theless, a student has properly learned mathematics only when the student sees the answer personally and is able to think through to its solution. As teachers know, guessing the right answer is not enough. A student who guesses the right answer or merely parrots the right answer has not yet developed the proper mathematical judgment. When students begin to exercise such mathematical judgment in particular instances, they are beginning to see the universal norms properly for the first time. Thus, the student's mathematical judgment is the proximate norm by which the rational subject exercises the rationality proper to the student. So, in the case of conscience, one cannot guess in the moral life or merely parrot norms that have been heard. In proper moral actions, one takes ownership and responsibility. One can say, "I did that." Such is the role and dignity of conscience. This is expressed in the affirmation that, in the case when an erroneous conscience is due to invincible ignorance, the person may be inculpable but the action remains evil, not good, and does not contribute to the growth of the person (§63). Since conscience is a personal judgment embodied in moral actions, we have a duty to "*form our conscience*" and to seek the guidance of Christ and his Church in learning the truth of the moral life (§63).³⁰ Through the judgment of a conscience submitted to Christ, the human creature may journey along the path of freedom to the fulfillment of the law and the achievement of happiness in God.

The Splendor of the Moral Object and Gifts of Self

The encyclical often summarizes the fulfillment of the law in the gift of self, both as perfected in Jesus Christ and as replicated in his followers. The gift of self is given through individual gifts of self. Apart from particular gifts of self, there would be no gift of self. This is one way of seeing the inner unity of the encyclical and connecting the various chapters that move from the decisive encounter with Christ to the correction of some errors among certain moral theologians. In order for human beings to find their meaning in their own gift of self in response to the gift who is Christ, they need to be able to translate this gift of self into their daily lives. Moral actions find meaning both within the narrative of each person and within the narrative of creation and redemption. Any attempts to exclude universally binding moral

³⁰ Cardinal Laghi notes that the modern mind typically resists instruction in morality, but *Veritatis Splendor* consistently proposes that such moral instruction is necessarily to live well as individuals and societies ("The Impact," 4).

norms would disrupt the narrative of creation and redemption, or at least remove the person from participating willingly and intelligently in that whole, which is but another way of describing the human person in its state of alienation. If the Gospel is to retain its power and splendor, then we must be able to say “yes” or “no” to its call in our lived experience.

The human person’s existential self may not be properly separated from a binding relationship to particular moral actions. The encyclical reaffirms the traditional teaching that sin is not only a state of alienation from God but also an act expressing such alienation. Christians are encouraged not only to confess sin, but to confess sins. The way to repent from sin is to repent from sins. There is no way to repent of sin in the abstract. The human person obtains universal truths in particular judgments. Mortal sin is primarily a rejection of God as the highest good and the source of goodness of creatures. The encyclical thus describes mortal sin as a *conversio ad creaturam*, a turning away from God and to the creature in an inordinate way (§70). Just as the path to God is taken one action at a time, so is the path away from God.

Once it is seen that human acts bear such importance, it is rather unsurprising that the encyclical rejects ways of depicting human acts as infinitely re-describable. Human acts are properly describable in terms of the moral object of the act. Intentions and circumstances necessarily play a role in the moral life and the evaluation of human acts, but they play a secondary role. They are “not sufficient for judging the moral quality of a concrete choice” (§77). In a much-analyzed passage, the encyclical teaches, “*the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the ‘object’ rationally chosen by the deliberate will*, as is borne out by the insightful analysis, still valid today, made by Saint Thomas” (§78). The object here might be described as what the intelligent agent is actually doing.

At the same time, the object is never merely a physical description, but must involve the agent or “*the perspective of the acting person*” (§78).³¹ Thus an act of theft and an act of borrowing are morally

³¹ The encyclical’s teaching on the moral object has been carefully explicated and thoroughly debated in many places, e.g.: Steven Long, *The Teleological Grammar of the Moral Act*, 2nd ed. (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2013); Stephen L. Brock, “*Veritatis Splendor* 78, St. Thomas, and (Not Merely) Physical Objects of Moral Acts,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. 1 (2008): 1–62; Martin Rhonheimer, “Intentional Actions and the Meaning of Object: A Reply to

different actions even if they might look similar as certain property exchanging hands. As the encyclical explains, “the human act, good according to its object, is also *capable to being ordered* to its ultimate end” (§78). Human acts have a species that either participates in the true good or is a rejection of that good. Human acts may be good, and they may be evil.

The grounding of morality in specific human acts is what leads the encyclical to reject views that separate the person from the act:

One must therefore reject the thesis, characteristic of teleological and proportionalist theories, which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species—its ‘object’—the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behavior or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned. (§79)

In light of the above, there are necessarily certain acts that, by their nature, are “incapable of being ordered” to God. Such acts are properly evil actions. They are “intrinsically evil . . . *always and per se*.” It might seem odd at first glance that the Gospel includes the truth that some acts are intrinsically evil, but this oddness mainly arises when we are considering our own actions. When we see the harm that some human beings have imposed upon others, it is not hard to see that certain actions ought never to be done. God will eventually right all wrongs and wipe away every tear when the Son judges the living and the dead. The joy of the Gospel includes that, though we ourselves have likely engaged in such evil deeds, words, and thoughts, we may repent and firmly trust in God’s mercy.

Moreover, universally binding norms are actually knowable both by reason and by revelation. Moral truth may be difficult to know with clarity, but so is most other truth. Difficulty in discovery should never be confused with impossibility. The general experience of human life reveals that a basic moral sense to do good and avoid evil is shared across cultures and that disagreements about morality presuppose the existence of moral truths beyond our creation: “Without the rational determination of the morality of human acting as stated above, it would be impossible to affirm the existence of

Richard McCormick,” in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 241–68.

an ‘objective moral order’ and to establish any particular norm the content of which would be binding without exception” (§82, citing *Dignitatis Humanae* §7). Human reason may come to know the truth of the moral order, the division between good and evil, and this division is encountered in the human “yes” or “no” expressed in individual moral actions.

The “yes” to the Gospel and the “no” to the world-in-rebellion manifest themselves most clearly in the case of martyrdom: “Martyrdom, accepted as an affirmation of the inviolability of the moral order, bears splendid witness both to the holiness of God’s law and to the inviolability of the personal dignity of man, created in God’s image and likeness” (§92). The identification of martyrdom with a witness to the moral order may be at first surprising, since we usually think of martyrs not as witnesses merely to the moral order, but as witnesses to the confession of the true faith in the face of persecution.³² It is helpful to recall, however, that love of the true God is the highest moral norm. Moreover, the moral norms that are part of the natural law have been taken up into revealed law. Thus, the natural law commands the love of God above all things: the Old Law specifies this as the worship of the God of Israel and no other; the New Law specifies this further as the worship of God and the Lamb (Rev 4–5). The confession that “Jesus is Lord” thus perfects the inclination of the natural law. The doctrinal weight of the affirmation includes the moral dimension that flows from charity. Jesus is not only the Lord; he is “my Lord and my God” (John 20). Martyrdom reveals that human beings have been elevated to live in accord with their deepest inclinations to love what is highest in reality.

The Splendor of Mercy

Conscience is not a flight from mercy, but rather a plea for mercy. When evil acts have been committed, “the verdict of conscience remains in [man] also as a pledge of hope and mercy: while bearing witness to the evil he has done, it also reminds him of his need, with the help of God’s grace, to ask forgiveness, to do good and to cultivate virtue

³² In “(Re-)Forming Freedom,” Hütter observes that, for the encyclical, martyrdom is about fidelity to God’s law and not to the confession of Christ as it is defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This is not an opposition, however, since the encyclical repeatedly affirms that the law is the law of Christ. Hütter offers an insightful and detailed treatment of the exaltations and falls of human freedom over the past several centuries in light of *Veritatis Splendor*.

constantly” (§61). The encyclical may be understood only through the lens of mercy, and this divine mercy is disclosed in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and in his fulfillment of the law and gift of the New Law. Mercy not only forgives sin, however, but also restores the sinner in a renewed condition of life.

The proper object of mercy is not sin or the law, but the sinner in his misery. That is to say, mercy requires holding both to the fullness of the moral law and to the forgiveness of sins offered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In particular, the encyclical quotes Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* to emphasize the connection between salvation and forgiveness: “While it is an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ, this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ himself showed by his conversations and dealings with men. Having come not to judge the world but to save it, he was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners” (§95, citing *Humanae Vitae* §29). The message of salvation requires an acknowledgement that we are sinners. Apart from a sense of sin, the message of salvation is no longer good news. By erroneously situating the moral life in the freedom of self-creation, certain trends of modern thought have tended in two unhelpful directions: either human beings experience no sense of guilt, since their actions are in accord with their private consciences, or they experience an all-pervasive sense of guilt, since they fail to live up to the seeming infinite demands and responsibilities of self-creation. Instead, the Church is called to bring a message of mercy to sinners.

The recognition of sin makes possible the reception of mercy. Likewise, the reception of mercy takes away the shame of the recognition of sin. The encyclical offers a compelling twist on the well-known parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee goes into the Temple with gracious words about his own achievements; the tax collector beats his chest and says “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Jesus says that the latter went home justified (Luke 18). The encyclical offers the following interpretation:

The tax collector represents a “repentant” conscience, fully aware of the frailty of its own nature and seeing in its own failings, whatever their subjective justifications, a confirmation of its need for redemption. The Pharisee represents a “self-satisfied” conscience, under the illusion that it is able to observe the law without the help of grace and convinced that it does

not need mercy. All people must take great care not to allow themselves to be tainted by the attitude of the Pharisee, which would seek to eliminate awareness of one's own limits and of one's own sin. In our own day this attitude is expressed particularly in the attempt to adapt the moral norm to one's own capacities and personal interests, and even in the rejection of the very idea of a norm. (§§104–5)

The encyclical contrasts the repentant conscience with the self-satisfied conscience. Notice that the repentant conscience distinguishes between the objective requirements of the moral law and the subjective justifications we make of our own behavior. This distinction opens up the path to redemption. The self-satisfied conscience, however, fails to see beyond its subjective justifications. In this manner, the Pharisees are exposed as not being the true followers of the law, as being blinded by their own adaptations of the law to their subjective views. The tax collector is the true follower of the law because he sees the reality of the distinction between his actions and what the law requires. This distinction is a real separation that may be overcome only through the mercy of God. The moral norms must be maintained in their objectivity and not adapted to our “capacities and personal interests” or else rejected as such. Without objective moral norms, there can be no mercy. The natural moral law thus makes sin possible; sin, however, allows the divine mercy to be offered to the sinner. The encyclical makes efforts to distinguish mercy and forgiveness from the mere excusing of sin or erroneous ethical theories that re-describe the sinful action as morally good.

Divine mercy not only forgives but also teaches: “It is the Gospel which . . . proclaims to them God's mercy, which is constantly at work to preserve them both from despair at their inability fully to know and keep God's law and from the presumption that they can be saved without merit” (§112). The moral law may be partially hidden or obscured by the brokenness of our societies or the brokenness of the individual, both self-inflicted and inflicted by others. Thus, human beings might reasonably despair as a result of their “inability fully to know and to keep God's law.” Instead, God's mercy reveals both the law in its fullness and our ability to live in accord with that law. This is the Gospel: that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law and communicates his fulfillment to those who believe in him and walk the path of discipleship. The encyclical speaks of the Gospel as a source of joy. “God also reminds sinners of the joy of forgiveness,

which alone grants the strength to see in the moral law a liberating truth, a grace-filled source of hope, a path of life” (§112). Here the emphasis is on the revelation of the law and of mercy. The moral law liberates, since Christ reveals its greatest depth and perfection in love of God and the love of neighbor and since he reveals simultaneously that this perfection is a gift that must be received through repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Mercy not only forgives; mercy seeks to restore. Mercy seeks to alleviate the misery of sin and suffering. Just as the Holy Spirit “renews the face of the earth” (see Ps 104:30), so also the gift of mercy flowers when it offers true liberation from sin and new strength to live in accord with the divine law (§118). The Christian faith thus possesses “profound humanity” and “extraordinary simplicity” (§119). Much of the encyclical is a return from the complexities surrounding difficult cases to a simple vision of the Christian moral life. The Christian life is neither too complex to understand nor too impossible to live. Instead, the faithful are encouraged: “Christian morality consists, in the simplicity of the Gospel, in *following Jesus Christ*, in abandoning oneself to him, in letting oneself be transformed by his grace and renewed by his mercy, gifts which come to us in the living communion of his Church” (§119). Mercy does not simply forgive; mercy renews! There is a profound spirit of equality in this message. Each person may encounter Christ directly through the ministry and evangelization of the Church. Holiness is not only for the few, not only for those studied in moral theology. “By the light of the Holy Spirit, the living essence of Christian morality can be understood by everyone, even the least learned, but particularly those who are able to preserve an ‘undivided heart’ (Ps 86:11)” (§119). The message to the least learned is a key part of the new evangelization. The Gospel has been enriched beautifully over time by being received and handed on by so many, but this enrichment never eclipses the Gospel’s profound simplicity and beauty.

Conclusion

The late Fr. Matthew Lamb, a colleague, teacher, and friend, was fond of repeating that “the higher does not negate the lower.” He judged that it was a common error of certain modern thinkers, such as Descartes, Hobbes, Bacon, and Kant, to separate out the higher from the lower and to see the two in competition within each other. Instead, the view of some of the ancients taken up by the Christian tradition held that one needed to distinguish—but not separate—the

higher from the lower. To recognize the beauty and power of the soul does not negate the body through which one comes to know both the human body and the human soul. The higher thus does not negate the lower. The power of the higher is shown in its ability to elevate the lower into the purposes of the higher without destroying what is proper to the lower.³³ For instance, my body shares in common some things with inanimate physical objects, some things with plants, and some things with non-rational animals. But all of those lower things are taken up, and not destroyed, when my body expresses the thoughts and judgments peculiar to a rational being, such as when typing this article.

As has been shown above, the seven-fold splendor of *Veritatis Splendor* beautifully manifests the insight that the higher does not negate the lower. We first saw that, although divine revelation is higher than human reason, it does not negate human reason. Thus, the encyclical is both pro-revelation and pro-rational inquiry. It excludes views of reason, such as rationalism and empiricism, that reject the superiority of what we learn through divine revelation, but it likewise excludes a fideism that would leave aside any rational reception of revelation. In short, the encyclical places moral theology properly within the entirety of *sacra doctrina*, within the mystery of Christ, within the drama of salvation history, within the Christian community, within the *oikonomia*, within the revealed law, and also within the metaphysics of creation and the perfections of created natures. Second, *Veritatis Splendor* shows that, while Christ fulfills the law, he does not negate the law. Christ's perfect act of self-gift on the Cross fulfills both the natural law and the law and the prophets of Israel. Christ's establishment of the New Covenant is a new creation of restored and elevated kinship with God. Third, the encyclical displays that Christian faith likewise is a commitment of the entire person, intellectual and volitional, to the redemption offered in Jesus Christ. The faith is an entrance into the fulfillment of the law, a

³³ C. S. Lewis articulates this same principle in different words: "We can understand that if God so descends into a human spirit [in the Incarnation], and human spirit so descends into Nature, and our thoughts into our senses and passions, and if adult minds (but only the best of them) can descend into sympathy with children, and men into sympathy with beasts, then everything hangs together and the total reality, both Natural and Supernatural, in which we are living is more multifariously and subtly harmonious than we had suspected. *We catch sight of a new key principle—the power of the Higher, just in so far as it is truly Higher, to come down, the power of the greater to include the less*" (*Miracles: A Preliminary Study* [New York: HarperCollins, 1960], 178; emphasis added).

fulfillment that human beings in their fallen condition could never reach. Nonetheless, the acceptance of the higher, the gift of Christ's fulfillment of the law, does not negate the lower, our return gift of an imperfect and incomplete fulfillment of the law. It is Christ's fulfillment that gives meaning and hope to our very necessary efforts to live life in accord with what he has revealed. Fourth, the encyclical nicely unfolds how the revelation of the Old Law and the New elevates and perfects the natural law. The natural law no longer is a sufficient guide for assisting human beings to reach their vocation to be children of God, but it remains a necessary guide. The natural law is not done away with by the revealed law, for there would be no elevation by grace were the human person not a moral agent inclined to love God and love neighbor. In fact, it is the revealed law that illumines the natural law in all of its splendor. Once the natural law is thus seen in the light of divine revelation, how the natural moral law embraces all human beings is likewise more clearly visible. Fifth, *Veritatis Splendor* declares that the objective and universal good does not negate the judgment of conscience about the concrete realization of that good in the here and now. Conscience is rather the way in which the human being participates as an intelligent, free creature in the objective and providential order of creation. If conscience became an independent source of moral judgment, then the human being would remain in a state of rebellion, incapable of loving God and neighbor. Sixth, it was shown how the human being, across its life and in its deepest realization, is not separate from individual specific actions. Instead, those individual actions, which, yes, are lower, so to say, or smaller than the entirety of human life, are nevertheless taken up into that lived narrative and holistic identity. To exclude concrete and individual acts from the entire mystery of the human person would wrongly enclose the person within a subjective prison that could not be expressed within this concrete world. Seventh, *Veritatis Splendor* professes that the revelation of divine mercy perfects rather than negates human nature, despite its wounded and sinful state. Thus, mercy moves toward the wounds and sins of human beings in order to heal the person. Sins, while certainly requiring address and judgment, no longer have the final word. Mercy shows that the path to healing comes through forgiveness and repentance. Mere human repentance, however, is not the initiator. The foundation of the Christian moral life is not in human efforts to begin again and obey the law, but in God's gracious initiative wherein he himself becomes human and accomplishes what we

alone cannot. The gift of the Christian moral life is founded on the splendor of divine mercy.

Pope Saint John Paul II summarizes the splendor of truth by making reference to the unique and transformative gift of God:

If God alone is the Good, no human effort, not even the most rigorous observance of the commandments, succeeds in “fulfilling” the Law, that is, acknowledging the Lord as God and rendering him the worship due to him alone (cf. Mt 4:10). *This “fulfilment” can come only from a gift of God: the offer of a share in the divine Goodness revealed and communicated in Jesus.* (§11) N.V

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