

Veritatis Splendor and the Universal Call to Holiness

MARIUSZ BILINIEWICZ
University of Notre Dame Australia
Sydney, Australia

THE AIM OF THIS ESSAY is to examine how the Second Vatican Council's teaching about the universal call to holiness is contained in Saint John Paul II's encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* [*VS*].¹ The paper will be divided in three parts. First, the idea of the universal call to holiness—that is, its basic tenets, its recent history, and its exposition in the documents of the Vatican II, especially in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* [*LG*—will be examined. Second, the presence of the idea of the universal call to holiness in *VS* will be discussed. Third, a question about the state of the universal call to holiness today, fifty years after Vatican II and twenty-five years after *VS* will be asked. It will be argued that the conciliar teaching that every Catholic is called to the fullness of the Christian life and the perfection of charity is needed today as much as it was at the time of the Council.

What Is the “Universal Call to Holiness”?

Lumen Gentium was officially promulgated on November 21, 1964, and devotes the entirety of chapter V to the universal call to holiness.² The

¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* [*VS*] (1993), w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html. To avoid an unnecessary agglomeration of footnotes, references to this document will be given in the body of the text in parentheses. Emphases given in the official text will be retained.

² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [*LG*] (1964), §40, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. References to this document will be given in the body of the text in parentheses. *LG* is not the only document of Vatican II that discusses

placement of this chapter, before the chapter on the religious and after the chapter on the laity, is significant, and could be compared to the decision of placing the chapter on the Church's hierarchy (ch. III) after the chapter on the "People of God" (ch. II). With regard to the hierarchical order of the Church, the fathers of the Council sought to overcome a certain theological and pastoral dualism that divided the pastors and the faithful into two separate groups in too sharp a manner. In the context of the theological emphasis on the importance of the distinction between the teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and the listening Church (*ecclesia discens*), or the active element of the Church (hierarchy) and the passive element (the laity), the fathers of Vatican II wanted to clarify that, ultimately, the pastors are also members of the "People of God" and that the sacrament of baptism is more primordial and fundamental for the Christian identity than the sacrament of holy orders. Similarly, with regard to the chapters on the call to holiness and on religious life, it is sometimes argued that by placing it as a bridge between the chapters on the laity and on the religious, the fathers of the Council wanted to stress that, while religious life is a special and unique way in which the call to holiness is lived, the call to holiness itself is not limited to those who have the vocation to religious life, but extends to all Christians by the virtue of their baptism.

Lumen Gentium uses this universalist language frequently in this chapter on holiness, which runs for four paragraphs (LG §§39–42): "Everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness" (LG §39); "Lord Jesus . . . preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples of every condition" (LG §40); "He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God" (LG §40); and "all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (LG §40). The Council teaches that "the classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who obey the voice of the Father and worship God the Father in spirit and in truth" (LG §41); therefore, "every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith" (LG §41). Further, "all Christ's faithful, whatever

the universal call to holiness. Among other documents, which either implicitly or explicitly mention this concept, one could include: Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965), Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), and Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963). However, due to space constraints, exclusive attention in this study will be given to *LG*.

be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives—and indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will” (*LG* §41). “Each one of the faithful must willingly hear the Word of God and accept His Will, and must complete what God has begun by their own actions with the help of God’s grace” (*LG* §42); “all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state” (*LG* §42). The Council gives the example of martyrdom as “an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love” (*LG* §42), and states that although “few are presented such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men. They must be prepared to make this profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross” (*LG* §42).

Paragraph 41 lists the ranks of those who share in this universal call to holiness: bishops, priests, ministers of lesser ranks, laymen, married couples and Christian parents, widows and single people, those who engage in labor. The call to holiness extends also to “all those who are weighed down with poverty, infirmity and sickness, as well as those who must bear various hardships or who suffer persecution for justice sake” (*LG* §41).

The source of the faithful’s holiness is baptism, since it is there that they “truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature” and are “really made holy” (*LG* §40). The means to attain this state include the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, prayer, self-abnegation, and practicing virtues, especially charity, which constitutes “the bond of perfection and the fullness of the law” (*LG* §42).

This emphasis which Vatican II places on the universal call to holiness of all Christians did not transpire in any kind of theological and cultural vacuum. All of the important movements of renewal which became landmarks of the Second Vatican Council, such as the biblical revival, the liturgical renewal, or the idea of the universal call to holiness, were preceded by grassroots movements that existed well before the Council. In this way, the official conciliar proclamations on these matters were results of those movements, rather than their causes. Those pre-conciliar grassroots movements were usually responding to problems that existed within contemporary Catholic life. The biblical movement was a response to the fact that Catholics did not read or know Scripture, and the liturgical movement was a response to the problem that Catholics were too often disconnected from the official liturgy of the Church in their private piety. The movement associated with the universal call to holiness was a reaction to a form of theological and practical dualism which introduced in the

Church distinctions that were not warranted by the Gospel and which actually ran contrary to it.

A common criticism against the way Catholic spirituality and moral theology were exercised between the Council of Trent and Vatican II is that spirituality and morality were not only divorced from each other but also sharply divided Catholics into two separate groups. In his classic work on the history of moral theology, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Servais Pinckaers, O.P., argued that the so-called “manualist tradition” introduced a distinction between Christian precepts and counsels. Precepts were the moral requirements that were addressed to everyone (they concerned mainly the Ten Commandments), and counsels were requirements addressed to the chosen few who embarked on the way to perfection (they concerned mainly the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount).³ As such, it was often understood that there were two categories of Catholics: the regular ones (usually identified with the laity) called to observe the basic, minimal precepts of natural law, and the heroes and heroines (usually identified with the clergy and religious) who were called to walk the extra mile and observe the Christian call to perfection by going beyond the minimum and actually trying to live the Sermon on the Mount in its fullness.⁴

However, this distinction between “ordinary” and “extraordinary” Catholics had little to do with the spirit of the Gospel or with the fact that, apart from radical poverty and dedicated virginity, the demands of Jesus are meant for all classes of people.⁵ Among the most vocal critics of this dualism, which distinguished “regular faithful” from “superheroes,” was Saint Francis de Sales, who attempted to show how every Christian, though living in the world, was called to the interior life and to perfection.⁶ Of him, Pope Pius XI stated:

St. Francis de Sales appears to have been given to the Church by a special plan of God in order to refute by the examples of his life and the authority of his teaching a prejudice already in vogue at his time and still widespread in our days, namely, that true holiness,

³ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 256–57.

⁴ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 256–57.

⁵ Thomas Dubay, “Holiness, Universal Call To,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., ed. Thomas Carson and Joann Cerrito, vol. 7 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2003), 5.

⁶ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 256.

consistent with the teaching of the Catholic Church, exceeds the reach of human efforts and at the very least is so difficult to attain that it does not in any fashion concern the common run of the faithful, but belongs only to a small number of persons endowed with a rare energy and an exceptional elevation of soul; that, besides, this holiness involves so much anxiety and trouble that it is absolutely incompatible with the situation of men and women living in the world.⁷

Among the particular grassroots pre-Vatican II initiatives that exemplified an attempt to overcome this dualism in Catholic morality and spirituality one can name such movements as the Catholic Action, *Comunione e Liberazione*, *Cursillo*, and *Opus Dei*. These movements attempted to involve the laity in the various dimensions of apostolate and in the general mission of the Church, and they paved the way to the teachings of Vatican II on the importance of overcoming the existing dualism and embracing the idea that there exists not two kinds of holiness, with every Christian called to either one or the other but not both, but rather one universal call to holiness which applies to all baptized Christians—clerical, religious, and lay alike.

***Veritatis Splendor* and the Universal Call to Holiness**

The expression “universal call to holiness” itself does not appear in *VS*; however, this does not mean the idea it represents is not present in the document. Conversely, the encyclical frequently makes references to the notion that every Christian is called to beatitude and, in fact, talks not only about the universal call to holiness of all Catholics, but also about the universal call for all human beings, Christian or otherwise, to lead a moral life. While holiness is not to be too closely associated with observing moral norms—since there is more to it than simply living a virtuous life—it is precisely in this context of morality that *VS* adopts the notion of Vatican II and develops it further.

When the encyclical mentions universality, it usually refers to moral norms that oblige everyone, regardless of their beliefs, not to mention their position or state in the community of the Catholic Church. As such, *VS* talks about the “universal knowledge of the good,” or “universal truth” (*VS* §§32, 61), “universal human values” (*VS* §33), the “objective and universal

⁷ Pope Pius XI as quoted by Gustave Thils, “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 494–503, at 495. I am indebted to Houda Jilwan for this reference.

law [of God]" (*VS* §§43, 51–52), "universal and permanent moral norms" (*VS* §§53, 55), "objective and universal demands of the moral good" (*VS* §59), "universal and objective norm[s] of morality" (*VS* 60), "universal rule[s]" (*VS* §67), "universal negative norm[s]" (*VS* §75), "universal and unchanging moral norms" (*VS* §§85, 96), universal and permanently valid precepts (*VS* §95), "universal experience" (*VS* §102), the universal character of the Church, which, having "received the anointing of the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20, 27) cannot be mistaken in belief" (*VS* §109), and finally, the ultimate, universal call which God addressed to all men and women (*VS* §123).

For John Paul II the call to holiness obliges everyone uniformly. Although it may not be lived by everyone in the same way, it leaves no room for any kind of dualism or degrees of holiness that would depend on a person's individual circumstances in the Church and in their life in general. When John Paul II talks about man's constant "yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it," man's "tireless search for knowledge in all fields," and "his search for the *meaning of life*" (*VS* §1), he is talking about man in general—the human person, as such—not about some particular group of persons. Similarly, when he recalls Vatican II's statement that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, is the answer to the existential questions of every man (*Gaudium et Spes* §22), he means every man and woman literally (*VS* §§2, 8, 9). While obviously not every person is immediately aware of this importance of the person of Christ for their life and not everyone pursues the call to holiness and salvation consciously, the Pope reminds us that it is precisely in following the universal moral norms that the way to salvation of every person opens up (*VS* §3).

When the encyclical mentions holiness, it talks first and foremost about the holiness of God (*VS* §§10–11). Any moral growth in humans is primarily a gift of God (*VS* §§11, 22–24), but it is a gift which is not unavailable for humans. Conversely, God not only created all humans with a desire to live morally, alongside some general guidelines about how to do it (natural law, *VS* §12), but also in Christ has given us grace, which enables those who are reborn in the waters of baptism to follow these guidelines and to build their life around them (*VS* §§15, 17, 21). This law is not extrinsic to us, but it is intrinsic, written upon the human heart and rooted in our redeemed human nature (*VS* §§12, 18, 24).

In chapter I, the Pope addresses the issue of the universality of the Christian call to holiness, or to the perfection of charity, mainly in its conclusion. When commenting on the call of Jesus to the rich young man to sell everything and follow him, John Paul II states in §18:

This vocation to perfect love is not restricted to a small group of individuals. *The invitation*, “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor,” and the promise “you will have treasure in heaven,” are meant for everyone, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbour, just as the invitation which follows, “Come, follow me,” is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God. Both the commandments and Jesus’ invitation to the rich young man stand at the service of a single and indivisible charity which spontaneously tends towards that perfection whose measure is God alone: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus makes even clearer the meaning of this perfection: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

In the following paragraph, the Pope reiterates that Jesus’s call “is addressed first to those to whom he entrusts a particular mission, beginning with the Twelve; but it is also clear that every believer is called to be a follower of Christ (cf. Acts 6:1)” (*VS* §19), since “*following Christ is . . . the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality*”; thus, “every disciple must follow Jesus, towards whom he is drawn by the Father himself (cf. Jn 6:44)” (*VS* §19). When discussing the radical, selfless, and unconditional love of Christ exemplified by his whole life, but most evidently by his Passion and death on the Cross, the Pope states that “this is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him” (*VS* §20). Everyone who wishes to be his disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (*VS* §20).

Chapter II of the encyclical is devoted to the relationship between freedom and law. In it the Pope reflects upon the idea of natural law as a “light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided” (*VS* §40), and as something given to all of us at creation. This light is universal, and John Paul II makes his own the words of his predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, who stated that “the *natural law* is written and engraved in the heart of each and every man, since it is none other than human reason itself which commands us to do good and counsels us not to sin” (*VS* §44). In the following paragraphs, he states that the natural law is, by definition, universal and immutable (*VS* §51). However, “*this universality does not ignore the individuality of human beings*, nor is it opposed to the absolute uniqueness of each person” (*VS* §51). The opposite is the case: the universality and immutability of natural law “embraces at its root each of the person’s free acts, which are meant to bear witness to the universality of the true good” (*VS* §51).

The universality of the same moral norms is staunchly emphasized in chapter II of the encyclical. Precepts of natural law, such as honoring God and one's parents, oblige always and everywhere, as they are "universally binding" and "unchanging" (*VS* §52). They unite in the same common good all people of every period of history, since all are created for the same divine calling and destiny (*VS* §52). In one of the more famous passages taken from chapter II, we read:

The *negative precepts* of the natural law are universally valid. They oblige each and every individual, always and in every circumstance. It is a matter of prohibitions which forbid a given action *semper et pro semper*, without exception, because the choice of this kind of behaviour is in no case compatible with the goodness of the will of the acting person, with his vocation to life with God and to communion with his neighbour. It is prohibited—to everyone and in every case—to violate these precepts. They oblige everyone, regardless of the cost, never to offend in anyone, beginning with oneself, the personal dignity common to all. (*VS* §52)

Not only are the negative precepts universal, but also the obligations to do good, which are indicated by the positive commandments, are binding always and everywhere. However, while one can be hindered from doing certain good actions, one can never be hindered from not doing certain actions, especially if one is prepared to die rather than to do evil (*VS* §52). If this readiness to go as far as laying down one's life for the truth and for choosing good over evil needs to be universal among all people, it must be even more universal and common for the followers of Christ. Although the concept of the universal call to holiness is not mentioned here by name, it is not difficult to infer it in this discussion.

It is not difficult to see the main tenets of this idea also in the background of the Pope's reflections on conscience. John Paul II repeatedly relates human conscience to objective, universal, and immutable moral norms, which are applied to particular concrete situations through the judgment of conscience (*VS* §§59, 62–64).

When discussing the notion of "fundamental option" and its implications for moral theology, the Polish Pope emphasizes the unity that, by definition, exists between the generic decision of leading a moral life and one's particular actions in the life of the person. He rejects the idea that some kind of creativity can be exercised by human mind and conscience to admit exceptions from rules that apply universally. The universal call to holiness, or at least to leading an upright moral life, can be recognized

precisely in the immutable and exceptionless character of those norms. Without eliminating the uniqueness and singularity with which every human person is endowed, John Paul II states clearly that no diverse sets of rules exist for various kinds of people and their various ways of life. Instead, there are moral principles that oblige everyone, regardless of circumstance:

The negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception. They do not leave room, in any morally acceptable way, for the “creativity” of any contrary determination whatsoever. Once the moral species of an action prohibited by a universal rule is concretely recognized, the only morally good act is that of obeying the moral law and of refraining from the action which it forbids. (*VS* §67)

Two paragraphs later, John Paul II argues that this is because “*the fundamental orientation can be radically changed by particular acts*” (*VS* §70), and can never be separated from them. The same principle is applied in the Pontiff’s treatment of the “teleological” character of human morality. By choosing to act in a particular way, we are ordering ourselves to a particular end, and the end of every human person, especially of a Christian, is God (*VS* §73). There are actions that must be avoided always and everywhere, even at the cost of giving up one’s life (*VS* §76). John Paul II gives the examples of “the holy men and women of the Old and New Testaments, who are considered such because they gave their lives rather than perform this or that particular act contrary to faith or virtue” (*VS* §76). The famous Christian axiom “it is better to die than to sin” is indirectly alluded to and recommended here by the Pope to all followers of Christ, not just to the chosen few.

John Paul II develops his reflection about martyrdom and moral life in the final sections of the encyclical, titled “Lest the Cross of Christ Be Emptied of Its Power” (ch. III) which, like chapter I and unlike chapter II, is directed more specifically to Catholic Christians. The tenets of the universal call to holiness are articulated in this part very clearly. In the context of the relationship between faith and morality, the Pope talks about the exceptionless character of negative moral prohibitions, and the universality and immutability of the moral norms that serve to protect the personal dignity and inviolability of every person (*VS* §90). He gives particular examples of biblical figures who preferred to die rather than compromise their moral integrity and, thus, their pursuit of holiness:

Susanna who was threatened with condemnation to death for refusing to commit adultery (Dan 23), John the Baptist who could not “refrain from speaking of the law of the Lord and rejecting any compromise with evil” (VS §91), and Stephen and Apostle James who were unwilling to deny Jesus (VS §91). He also speaks about how “countless other martyrs accepted persecution and death rather than perform the idolatrous act of burning incense before the statue of the Emperor (cf. Rev 13:7–10)” (VS §91). They refused to perform “even a single concrete act contrary to God’s love and the witness of faith. Like Christ himself, they obediently trusted and handed over their lives to the Father, the one who could free them from death (cf. Heb 5:7)” (VS §91). He also mentions:

. . . the example of numerous Saints who bore witness to and defended moral truth even to the point of enduring martyrdom, or who preferred death to a single mortal sin. In raising them to the honour of the altars, the Church has canonized their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances, and the refusal to betray those commandments, even for the sake of saving one’s own life. (VS §91)

Martyrdom, in the words of John Paul II, is “an affirmation of the inviolability of the moral order,” which “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” (VS §92). It “rejects as false and illusory whatever ‘human meaning’ one might claim to attribute, even in ‘exceptional’ conditions, to an act morally evil in itself” and “is . . . the exaltation of a person’s perfect ‘humanity’ and of true ‘life’” (VS §92). It is “an outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church” and “a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem* so that the splendour of moral truth may be undimmed in the behaviour and thinking of individuals and society” (VS §93).

With regard to the relationship between martyrdom and the universal call to holiness for the whole Church, John Paul II’s teaching repeats and develops the teaching of Vatican II in *LG*:

Although martyrdom represents the high point of the witness to moral truth, and one to which relatively few people are called, there is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice. Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral

order can demand, even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes-heroic commitment. In this he or she is sustained by the virtue of fortitude, whereby—as Gregory the Great teaches—one can actually “love the difficulties of this world for the sake of eternal rewards.” (*VS* §93)

If even non-Christians have the duty of following the call to lead an upright moral life and recognize that “there are truths and moral values for which one must be prepared to give up one’s life” (*VS* §94), then this obligation of pursuing heroism and perfection pertain even more to Christians. Of the universal character of both moral norms and the obligation to follow them, the Pope states:

This service [of defending universal moral norms] is directed to *every man*, considered in the uniqueness and singularity of his being and existence: only by obedience to universal moral norms does man find full confirmation of his personal uniqueness and the possibility of authentic moral growth. For this very reason, this service is also directed to *all mankind*: it is not only for individuals but also for the community, for society as such. These norms in fact represent the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy, which can come into being and develop only on the basis of the equality of all its members, who possess common rights and duties. *When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone.* It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the “poorest of the poor” on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal. (*VS* §96)

Evidently, a just society can be built only when the inviolable character of these absolute norms is recognized and protected (*VS* §§98–101).

John Paul II also acknowledges the practical difficulties in fulfilling this ideal which is laid down by God and likewise desired by our human nature. He refers to uncommon sacrifices that exact a high price, including sacrifice of one’s own life (*VS* §102). However, he also mentions that God gives humans grace to overcome these temptations. Recalling the declaration of the Council of Trent, he reminds us that “keeping God’s law in particular situations can be difficult, extremely difficult, but it is never impossible” (*VS* §102). Grace that is needed to pursue a moral life—which,

in turn, is a necessary component of the universal call to holiness—is to be found in “the saving Cross of Jesus, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, in the Sacraments which flow forth from the pierced side of the Redeemer (cf. Jn 19:34)” (*VS* §103).

The Pope then develops the theme of a proper understanding of Catholic morality and the commonly raised objection that it is only a lofty ideal that is not attainable always and everywhere, and certainly not by everyone. He states:

It would be a very serious error to conclude . . . that the Church’s teaching is essentially only an “ideal” which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated to the so-called concrete possibilities of man, according to a “balancing of the goods in question.” But what are the “concrete possibilities of man”? And of *which* man are we speaking? Of man *dominated* by lust or of man *redeemed by Christ*? This is what is at stake: the *reality* of Christ’s redemption. *Christ has redeemed us!* This means that he has given us the possibility of realizing *the entire* truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the *domination* of concupiscence. And if redeemed man still sins, this is not due to an imperfection of Christ’s redemptive act, but to man’s will not to avail himself of the grace which flows from that act. God’s command is of course proportioned to man’s capabilities; but to the capabilities of the man to whom the Holy Spirit has been given; of the man who, though he has fallen into sin, can always obtain pardon and enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit. (*VS* §103)

John Paul II warns about the unacceptable “attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified, without even the need to have recourse to God and his mercy” (*VS* §104). He complains that “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” (*VS* §105).

In the section on morality and new evangelization in chapter III, the Pontiff designates an upright morality as a powerful tool for spreading the Gospel. He states that:

The life of holiness which is resplendent in so many members of the People of God, humble and often unseen, constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God’s love, and the value of unconditional fidel-

ity to all the demands of the Lord's law, even in the most difficult situations. (*VS* §107)

He continues by stating that the life of holiness is the effect and full expression of the threefold office of Christ (priest, prophet, king), which every Christian receives at baptism. By immersion in the sacramental life of the Church, every Catholic is subsequently called to live a life of holiness; the universality of the Church's sacramental life facilitates the universality of holiness. Essentially, this life of holiness and evangelization is possible thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to every Christian (*VS* §107).

John Paul II's insistence on the universality of the call to live an upright moral life, and, consequently, to arrive at holiness, is also very visible in the concluding section of the encyclical. Recalling again the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Pope states:

No matter how many and great the obstacles put in his way by human frailty and sin, the Spirit, who renews the face of the earth (cf. Ps 104:30), makes possible the miracle of the perfect accomplishment of the good. This renewal, which gives the ability to do what is good, noble, beautiful, pleasing to God and in conformity with his will, is in some way the flowering of the gift of mercy, which offers liberation from the slavery of evil and gives the strength to sin no more. (*VS* §118)

In this final section of the document the Pontiff does not talk only about the gift of following the path of Jesus, but also of the gift of understanding the Church's teaching about morality. Referring to ideas that "Christian morality is in itself too demanding, difficult to understand and almost impossible to practice" (*VS* §119), he recalls that it is actually extraordinarily simple and could be summarized as simply following Jesus Christ. Without denying the complexity of everyday realities, the Pope states that "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)" (*VS* §119). He also stresses that following Christ provides the vital energy needed to carry out the reality of living the Christian vocation (*VS* §119).

Universal Call to Holiness Today

The question that must now be asked concerns the state of the idea of the universal call to holiness today, more than fifty years after *LG* and twen-

ty-five years after *VS*. As said before, one key point each document attempts to make is overcoming the unhealthy and un-Gospel idea of a dualism that would exist between various categories of holiness in the Church; that is, that there might be some heroes and heroines who indeed are called to live the Christian life to its fullness, but they are few in numbers and are “special cases” rather than a regular occurrence. Apart from those heroes and heroines, there would be the rest of the faithful for whom it is enough to follow the basic principles of natural law, or the Ten Commandments, and to avoid mortal sin. Both Vatican II and John Paul II argued forcefully against such an understanding of holiness, which divides the Church into “first class” and “second class,” into “ordinary” and “extraordinary,” “radical” and “moderate,” or “extreme” and “mild.” When it comes to holiness, no Christian is called to be mediocre, moderate, average, ordinary, or second class; instead, all should be heroes and heroines, radical, extraordinary, first class, with no exceptions. Moreover, everyone is given means to arrive at this goal, and God does not spare grace in helping us to attain perfection even in the midst of our complex and messy life situations. Naturally, no one achieves perfection here on earth; however, without falling into temptation of Pelagianism, all Christians should strive for it and believe that this is ultimately their goal and mission as disciples of Christ.

Has cultivating the universal call to holiness in the post-Vatican II era helped to overcome these dualistic tendencies? In many quarters it has, and experience of the life of the Church—especially of the various ecclesial communities gathering primarily lay people—shows that Catholics become increasingly more aware of their noble calling. However, it seems that in recent times and in certain places a resurgence of pre-Vatican II dualistic tendencies can sometimes be observed. This often happens in the context of interpretation and implementation of Pope Francis’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (*AL*) from 2016, especially of its famous chapter VIII, which discusses pastoral care of Catholics within irregular unions.⁸

A lot of ink has been spilt on this topic, and this author has been among those who have been spilling it, and so there is no need to repeat here what was said elsewhere.⁹ The focus of this part of this paper will not be the document itself, but the reception of the document and its consequences

⁸ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* [*AL*] (2016), w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

⁹ See Mariusz Biliniewicz, *Amoris Laetitia and the Spirit of Vatican II: The Source of Controversy* (London: Routledge, 2018).

for our understanding or mis-understanding of the universal call to holiness and for creating an ecclesial atmosphere which will either foster or hinder the pursuit of this appeal. To do this, some official episcopal, diocesan guidelines, which implement the parts of the exhortation relating to pastoral care of Catholics living in irregular unions, will be examined.

While reading some of those episcopal guidelines and theological commentaries, one cannot help garner the impression that the kind of universal call to holiness about which Vatican II and John Paul II talked does not really apply always and everywhere. John Paul II insisted in *VS* that there are rules that bar any exception, regardless of circumstance, that there can be no excuse for breaking of the moral law, and thus compromising one's attempt to arrive at holiness, that it is better to die than to sin, that martyrs are examples who should be followed by all Christians, and that those who are reborn in the waters of baptism, anointed with the Holy Spirit in confirmation, fed with Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist, and forgiven and given a new life in the sacrament of penance should be ready to give their own life than to compromise with evil. But while these were the emphases which John Paul II made in *VS*, some of the guidelines regarding the implementation of chapter VIII of *AL* seem to suggest that this might not always be the case. There are rules, they seem to be saying, but there are also exceptions to those rules. There are ideals, which can, indeed, be achieved by the heroic efforts of some spiritual supermen and superwomen, but there is also "real life," in which being a "hero" is not always possible.

With regard to the famous issue of sacramental discipline of those who live in irregular unions, the ideal of living in sexual continence—that is, of not breaking the sixth commandment—is often being presented in these guidelines not as a universal and unnegotiable precondition for being admitted to the Eucharist anymore, but as a solution that can be proposed to those couples, but with an understanding that it might not be feasible to practice in certain circumstances. For example, the guidelines issued by the bishops of Malta state that, while the possibility of conjugal continence is to be examined, following this "ideal" is not easy. In some cases it is "humanly impossible" without putting at risk other aspects of a couple's life together and sometimes it can give rise to an even greater harm (e.g., the breakdown of yet another family). If the process of discernment leads to *this* conclusion (that sexual abstinence is not feasible) and a person in an irregular union feels they are at peace with God, they can be admitted to the sacraments, since they seem to be considered unable to arrive at the ideal situation, at least for now.¹⁰

¹⁰ Archdiocese of Malta and the Diocese of Gozo, *Criteria for the Application of Chap-*

Guidelines issued by the archdiocese of Braga also state that “the possibility of a commitment to live in conjugal continence can be examined” when the concrete circumstances of a couple make it “feasible,” especially when both Christians walk on a solid path of faith. When they do not and when sexual continence puts at risk the stability of a new family, access to the sacraments can still be granted to them, given the unfeasibility of the “brother-and-sister” solution.¹¹

Guidelines issued in the diocese of Rome (the pope’s own diocese) speak in a similar tone:

When the concrete circumstances of a couple make it feasible, meaning when their journey of faith has been long, sincere, and progressive, it is to be proposed that they live in continence. However, if this decision is too difficult to practice and if it threatens the stability of the family unit, *Amoris Laetitia* does not rule out the possibility of accessing penance and the Eucharist.¹²

Guidelines such as these—and the list is not exhaustive; one could add the dioceses of San Diego, Lisbon, Buenos Aires, or national guidelines published by bishops of Brazil and Germany—give the impression that “feasibility” and the level of difficulties involved are now the key to pastoral discernment of situations which concern morality. Admittedly, many of these guidelines do not fail to propose the solution of sexual abstinence and to mention the ideal proposed by the Church, but they also do not fail to give the impression that the universal call to holiness (of which an inevitable component is following the moral law of the Gospel) does not have to be put into practice in its fullness readily. In fact, some of these guidelines seem to suggest, as some say that *AL* itself suggests, that this call to holiness can be realized by *not* following the law of the Gospel in its radical fullness here and now; after all, in the document it is stated that “conscience can [rightly] . . . come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s

ter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia*, January 2017, ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2017/PRESS%20RELEASES/Norms%20for%20the%20Application%20of%20Chapter%20VIII%20of%20AL.pdf.

¹¹ Bishop Jorge Ortega, *Building the House Upon the Rock*, pastoral letter, archdiocese of Braga, December 5, 2017, www.diocese-braga.pt/media/contents/contents_Dbdf5s/Building%20the%20House%20upon%20the%20Rock.pdf.

¹² Agostino Vallini, “*La Letizia Dell’amore: Il Cammino Delle Famiglie a Roma*,” Basilica di San Giovanni in Laterano, September 19, 2016, 13, www.romasette.it/wp-content/uploads/Relazione2016ConvegnoDiocesano.pdf (translation mine).

limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal" (*AL* §303). While there is no doubt that the process of discernment needs to be applied to every case individually and that different situations require different applications of the same principles, dividing the faithful into those who can, with the help of God's grace, arrive at the ideal now and those who cannot resembles the pre-Vatican II language of two categories of the faithful: the heroes and the rest. The language of "feasibility" appears to suggest that not everyone is called by God to holiness and to following the moral law here and now, but that there are people who, at least for now, have no other option available to them, except for choosing a lesser evil, that is, a smaller sin over a greater one. There might be Catholics who are called and able to put the ideal into practice now; however, there are others who are either not called to do this now, or who are unable, either subjectively or, more disturbingly, objectively to do this at a particular time.

Would John Paul II agree that there are situations in which moral agents cannot help sinning and cannot "act differently and decide otherwise without further sin" (*AL* §301)? It seems that at least in *VS* he was arguing precisely against such a position. Whatever might be the intention of those who understand and implement *AL* in such a way that there are rules but also exceptions from the rules for those who cannot abide by the rules, what is actually taken from such texts by a great number of Catholics is precisely this message: there might be certain ideals out there, but, after all, only heroes can arrive at them, and who can be such a hero? In the meantime, the Church can tolerate and does tolerate the non-ideal situations, as well as the fact that not everyone is a hero and that not everyone can become one.

What is perhaps most ironic and intriguing in this whole process is that this kind of moral theology, which smacks of proportionalism and situation ethics (which believes that the end can sometimes justify the means), is often considered by those who promote it to be a result of the renewal of moral theology which was called for by the Second Vatican Council. However, ironically, by introducing this distinction between those heroic Catholics who want and can live up to the "ideal" of the Church teaching and those who cannot, a very pre-conciliar mode of thinking is actually being introduced. It is a resemblance of the post-Tridentine dualism against which Vatican II argued in its teaching about the universal call to holiness. With regard to the universality of holiness, not only priests and religious but all Catholics are called to the perfection of charity. Because of their baptism, all Christians essentially have the same vocation, that is, the vocation to beatitude. John Paul II knew that and in *VS* developed this idea in the area of morality: the same rules of conduct apply to everyone;

there are no “first class” and “second class” Catholics. Since there is no division in the grace available in sacraments and no division in God’s call, there should be no distinction between heroes and the rest of the common folk. Everyone is called to be a hero, to live in the fullness of the truth, to respond to God’s calling, and to make use of the available means to respond to this call most fully.

Guidelines on the application of chapter VIII of *AL* that use the language of ideals, heroism, feasibility, and possibility (or non-possibility) of living the precepts of moral law contribute (perhaps unwillingly and even unwittingly) to undermining this landmark teaching of Vatican II and of John Paul II about the universal call to holiness. Regardless of salutary motivations of those who produce such guidelines, the language they choose to adopt does little service to the promotion of the idea that God’s demands are the same for everyone, that God’s grace is available to everyone, that everyone is invited to holiness, and that everyone is expected to accept this invitation. This is what the Vatican II wanted all Catholics to know, and this is what John Paul II insisted upon in *VS*. The fact that an emerging shift from a universalist perspective to a quasi-pre-Vatican II dualistic way of thinking about morality and holiness can be recently observed these days makes the encyclical of Saint John Paul II and his contribution to this discussion all the more relevant today. N&V