

The Splendor of Transfiguration at the Heart of the Christian Life: The Influence of Pope Saint Paul VI on *Veritatis Splendor*

RENÉE KÖHLER-RYAN
University of Notre Dame Australia
Sydney, Australia

ON THE SIXTH OF AUGUST, 1993, Pope Saint John Paul II signed *Veritatis Splendor*.¹ That date, the liturgical feast day of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, is significant for several reasons, each of which reveals a dimension of the “splendor” of truth about which he writes. The point most focused on here is that John Paul II’s identification of Paul VI as the “Pope of the Transfiguration” may be an influence on the document. His admiration of his predecessor’s encyclicals, particularly those that highlight the moral life and the importance of the Church in the world, offer various dimensions to consider about the splendor of truth about which he speaks.² This comes to the fore with a close reading of the homilies and addresses that John Paul gave on the feast of the Transfiguration throughout his pontificate. Thereby, the thesis emerges that *Veritatis Splendor* may be an extension, a response, and even an homage to Paul’s *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964).³ Paul’s encyclical, also issued on the feast of the Transfiguration, argues that the Church acts as Christ’s source of illumination at the heart of the world. John Paul seems to consider this further evidence of Paul’s

¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6 [Feast of the Transfiguration], 1993), w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

² John Paul II, “Angelus,” Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1989, §2, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1989/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19890806.html.

³ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

deeply personal love of the Church. Such illumination is due to the way that Christians lead their daily lives, in the light of Christ's law of love. Paul VI says in *Ecclesiam Suam* that he does not have the space to articulate exactly how the moral life and action work. Yet, he emphasizes how important daily life is for this essential work of the Church. The argument here is that *Veritatis Splendor* seems to pick up the task of articulating just how such a moral life develops.

In John Paul's chosen title, "splendor" illuminates how the transcendental of goodness is inseparable from both truth (*veritas*) and beauty. To lead a good life, in charity, is to live in truth and to become beautiful—by imitating Christ and reflecting the light of divine life. Thus God, the true beauty, is known as Creator and exemplar: he reveals the inner form of the Christian life, which constantly in turn announces itself in morally good actions in the world. To see Christ in unveiled glory is to glimpse the contours of divine activity, which human life can reflect when it strives toward the truth. Fittingly then, from the initial statement of the text onward, a major theme in *Veritatis Splendor* is that humans are made in God's image; and that this image is most clearly known by contemplating the Son of God, incarnate and glorious on Mount Tabor.⁴ The encyclical adverts to the revelation that humans may be made to reflect God's glory, but that their capacity to fully be his image has become corrupted through sin.⁵ Only when humans freely choose to live the moral law in charity can they become once more untarnished, and radiate the life of Christ: this is the possibility of human transfiguration that is particularly evident in the lives and deaths of the martyrs and saints.⁶

This link between the Transfiguration and splendor has already been articulated by J. A. DiNoia, O.P., who argues that "the date upon which this great encyclical was signed provides a key to unlocking its meaning, that transfiguration and communion are at its heart."⁷ DiNoia is far

⁴ See, for instance, the opening "Blessing": "The splendour of truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator and, in a special way, in man, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26). Truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord. Hence the Psalmist prays: 'Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord' (*Ps* 4:6)." See also §§2, 5, 19, 19, 31, 34, 38, 41, 45, 73, 80, 86, 92, 95, and 99, which emphasize the importance of humans as image.

⁵ In §1, this is discussed as a darkening of the mind, which will then have implications for the human conscience.

⁶ Discussion in §93, which will be further examined below.

⁷ J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "*Veritatis Splendor*: Moral Life as Transfigured Life," in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology: Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars*,

from alone in arguing that these themes signify the way that the encyclical fundamentally reorients moral theology toward the heart of why Christians live according to the divinely revealed moral law. This article discusses him more overtly than others because he makes the direct link between the encyclical and the mystery of the Transfiguration.⁸ John Paul II states his intentions in writing the encyclical, which are mainly to address certain defects at play in his time in the realm of moral theology. He really goes further than this, though, to emphasize the importance of orthodox moral teaching, within a context of dialogue and loving relationship with Christ. *Veritatis Splendor* emphasizes the objective reality of the moral law, which then makes possible the subjective experience of responding to truth, in freedom. The Christian understanding of what it means to be good no longer focuses first on following the letter of the law. Instead, why Christians follow divinely revealed laws is central. In this context, the commandments unfold as ways to understand how one's life can become a glorious participation in the love shared amongst the Persons of the Trinity.⁹ When humans conform to the life of Christ, they imitate him and reflect the glory of the Godhead.¹⁰

ed. J. A. DiNoia, O.P., and Romanus Cessario, O.P. (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999), 1. An excellent overview of the importance of the concept of "splendor" in the document, from various perspectives, can be found in: Michael Dauphinais, "The Splendor and Gift of the Christian Moral Life: *Veritatis Splendor* at Twenty-Five," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 16, no. 4 (2018): 1261–312. This article also includes an extensive bibliography of key texts considering the importance of *Veritatis Splendor*.

⁸ The term that is very often used to describe the significance of what John Paul II is contributing to moral theology is "renewal." For instance: Joseph Ratzinger, "The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis Splendor*," *Communio* 32 (Summer 2005): 357–68. Similarly, Christopher J. Thompson writes "Moral Theology in a Sapiential Mode: *Veritatis Splendor* and the Renewal of Moral Theology," *The Thomist* 65 (2001): 465–73. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., finds that the document provides a salient configuration of the modern understanding of autonomy, emphasizing that "the pivotal point of *Veritatis splendor* lies in the coordination it establishes between human freedom and truth" (Servais Pinckaers, O.P., "An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis Splendor*," in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 38). Livio Melina argues that *Veritatis Splendor* is a response to the ethical relativism and subjectivism of contemporary society, and at the same time a contribution to the new evangelization (*Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For the Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001], esp. 13–33 [ch. 1: "Between Crisis and Renewal"]).

⁹ DiNoia, "Veritatis Splendor," 2.

¹⁰ DiNoia, "Veritatis Splendor," 7.

To explain how the Transfiguration is so important to interpreting *Veritatis Splendor*, DiNoia draws upon a sermon by Pope Saint Leo, who argues that the moment of the Transfiguration happened so that the apostles would not despair later, when they saw Christ on the Cross, and so that they—and future Christians—would glimpse something of their future glory. Christ transfigured is, Leo and DiNoia argue, the prefiguration of what humans can become, at the end of an earthly life well lived.¹¹ While Pope Saint Leo's sermon does aid in understanding the importance of the Transfiguration, John Paul II's inspiration for thinking about the transfigured life is even more assuredly that of another now officially sainted pope: Pope Saint Paul VI. Reading through the addresses and Angelus messages that John Paul II gave on the sixth of August throughout his pontificate, it becomes obvious that he considered the feast of the Transfiguration inseparable from the life and ministry of this predecessor.

Consistently, John Paul II associates Paul VI with the concept of transfiguration; so much is this the case that his statement, cited above, that the prior Pontiff is the "Pope of the Transfiguration" becomes unsurprising in that context.¹² On the same date in 1989, John Paul II reasons that not only did Paul VI die on the sixth of August; he also issued his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, on the same date in 1964; and his encyclical brings to the fore the work of transfiguration that the author, Paul VI, envisions for the Church.¹³ Reading *Veritatis Splendor* against the background of *Ecclesiam Suam* reveals that the Christian moral life makes present in the world the splendid light of Christ's Transfiguration. In particular, *Veritatis Splendor* extends the earlier encyclical's claim that the daily lives of Christians shine from the center of the world. Christ transfigured thus remains present, through the members of his Church, in a world that would otherwise lack the means to know that the good life is splendid. A gentle leitmotif throughout the thought of both of these Popes is that what we do in daily life has tremendous significance in both personal and ecclesial dimensions. That is, even in the quietest moments of daily life, the free choices of a Christian are transformative. Conforming ourselves to the image of Christ on Mount Tabor, Christians can provide light to others.

¹¹ DiNoia, "Veritatis Splendor," 5–7.

¹² John Paul II, "Angelus" (August 6, 1989), §2.

¹³ John Paul II, "Angelus," §2. John Paul II, "Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II: Messa Nella Chiesa Parrocchiale di San Tommaso da Villanova," Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1989, §5, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1989/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19890806_s-tommaso-villanova.html.

Paul VI explains in *Ecclesiam Suam* that Christians radiate from the center, through a series of concentric circles.¹⁴ John Paul II brings to that vision his dynamic, personalist understanding of moral action. The later Pope seems particularly struck by Paul's insistence that there are no compromises regarding truths concerning the life and actions of human persons.¹⁵ For the beautiful human capacity to reflect Christ's light for others derives from joyous sacrifice, exemplified by the lives of the martyrs. This article considers each of these points in more detail. First, in order to highlight key aspects of the moral life in light of Christ's Transfiguration, it examines what, philosophically, splendor means and what transfiguration entails for the human person. Secondly, it develops John Paul II's understanding of the intransitive aspect of human action to develop the foregoing point. Thirdly, it explores his addresses and homilies on the feast of the Transfiguration at various points in his pontificate. Then, it articulates how *Ecclesiam Suam* forms the backdrop for significant aspects of *Veritatis Splendor*, making the case that the later encyclical can be read as a continuation and deepening of the earlier document. Finally, it considers how some of John Paul II's later writings consider vocation as a manifestation of transfiguration. In all of this it becomes evident that what Christians do on a daily basis brings them to transfiguration: the extraordinary happens in the seemingly ordinary, revealing the splendor toward which all humans are called.

Splendor and the Transfigured Human Life

The term "transfiguration" brings us into the space where philosophy and theology meet. While etymologically this word means to change in appearance,¹⁶ the splendor of human transfiguration also refers to the development of form. While in Christ's case, the revelation of existing form is made manifest, for humans, both form and splendor are constantly in development. John Paul seems to think along these lines in *Veritatis Splendor*, in that he constantly refers to the need to conform to God's laws, thereby becoming made in God's image. This point is particularly striking in §73, where John Paul quotes Cyril of Alexandria's

¹⁴ See discussion below, which focuses on *Ecclesiam Suam*, §§96–115.

¹⁵ See John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §80, where he quotes *Humanae Vitae*, §14, which underscores that evil acts are never lawful, even in the seeming pursuit of good; and reference in footnote 5 to *Populorum Progressio*, §13: "Since the Church does dwell among men, she has the duty 'of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.'"

¹⁶ From *trans* ("change") plus *figura* ("form, shape, figure"); see "Transfigure," in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

reflection that the divine image shines through us when we lead lives which are “good and in conformity with virtue.”

Effectively, the link between the transcendentals is in operation here, perhaps because of John Paul II’s awareness of the Scholastic development of these ideas. Thereby, the term “splendor” has a particular meaning, referring to the way that the form of something—what is most knowable about that thing—shines its light on the human mind.¹⁷ Such knowledge is illuminative—and we often think of human knowledge in this way. A light is shed, for the knower, upon the thing that is known; and a revelation occurs. The interrelationship between the transcendentals of being, truth, goodness, and beauty is such that the splendor (or beauty) of a thing will be greater and more obvious the more a living thing has actualized what it fundamentally is, so that its form is more in view. A rose bush in bloom will appear more beautiful than when it bears no flowers, or has just been pruned. A human person will be more splendid the more he or she is living in relationship to and in alignment with truth, through the freedom particular to the virtuous life.

Theologically speaking, that Truth is Christ. Unlike the rose bush, the human person can choose for Truth through living a good life, motivated by Christ-like love. Like no other animate substance on earth, the Christian life is like a dramatic work of art, striving toward splendor: by knowing, loving, and responding to the truly beautiful, transfigured Christ. That Christ’s manifestation of glory to the apostles is called a “transfiguration” is fitting because who he is in that moment is unchanged, but how he appears is momentarily altered. Christ’s Transfiguration constitutes a significant development in his relationship to the apostles and then later to us through the Gospel.

Most importantly, his Transfiguration manifests the human vocation to be splendid. Humans can, though, ignore or reject this calling. Crucially, God’s revealed law provides guidance toward fulfillment, but when this is not adopted—to use the language of *Veritatis Splendor*—deformation rather than conformation takes place. Christ’s Transfiguration reveals who he is, from all eternity, but our transfiguration takes place in time, and

¹⁷ One discussion of this can be found in Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (Minneapolis, MN: Filiquarian, 2007), 28: “The form, that is to say, the principle which constitutes the proper perfection of all that is, which constitutes and achieves things in their essences and qualities, which is, finally, if one may so put it, the ontological secret that they bear within them, their spiritual being, their operating mystery—the form, indeed, is above all the proper principle of intelligibility, the proper clarity of every thing.”

only when we choose for what is good, true, and beautiful. Only then can the splendor of the human form, as an image of God's beauty, shine forth. Clearly we need guidance during our earthly pilgrimage, which makes it all the more fitting that Christ's appearance on a mount with Moses and Elijah emphasizes his role as teacher and guide. As the argumentative thrust of *Veritatis Splendor* maintains, when humans respond to Christ as the Truth, they can resemble him to become transfigured. Thus they can become true to human form, radiating the Light, and Life, of God through their daily actions.

Considering the metaphysical and aesthetic dimensions of splendor in relationship to form heightens awareness of the importance of the concept of transfiguration that is only named once but that works in the background of this document. In Matthew's account of the moment of Christ's Transfiguration, he uses the Greek term *metamorphōthē*, which explicitly refers to a change in form and brings with it the resonances of Greek concepts of matter and form. One might think of the synonymous word "transformation" to come closer to the mark. When something or someone metamorphoses, its form changes. This is usually a development of what is already there. Ovid's ancient work *Metamorphoses* depicts this occurrence as something radical and strange; a transition from one shape, and even substance, into another. In Matthew's Gospel, on the other hand, Christ's Transfiguration refers not to a change in his inner form, but rather in the way that this form manifests itself to others. His apostles see him as they never have before: radiating the glory of the Godhead.

The conceptual difficulty is then to know how humans could possibly become transfigured. Ovid's articulation indicates the profundity of this kind of change; but in the Christian understanding, humans do not morph into something completely different. Instead, they become most fully themselves when they lead the life toward which they are called. In being good, they become beautiful, and this transformation is their share in Christ's glory—in the splendor of Truth incarnate.¹⁸ Furthermore, when they live as Christians in the world, they represent to others what it means for humans to reflect God's glory. There is, one might say, the capacity for the human person's form, their moral life, to become so splendid that others recognize its difference from the warped image of God found in the world, as the effect of original sin. The inner light of the Christian life manifests in action that—as the then Karol Wojtyła argued earlier

¹⁸ In this respect, the idea of "participated theonomy" can be considered another way in which John Paul II thinks of how humans participate in the light of the Trinity, which is the way of transfiguration (*Veritatis Splendor*, §41).

in *The Acting Person*—is intransitive. That is, he emphasizes how moral action affects the person who is acting as he or she performs the act. Again in more theological terms, a moral action can make a person more or less Christ-like, depending on whether the action is good or bad. To extend the argument a degree further: either the image of God, qua person, will shine forth or it will become occluded.

John Paul II and Freedom

Such transformation, or transfiguration, according to John Paul II, can only happen when humans experience the freedom of choosing for good. John Paul II's philosophical work on this point informs how he reorients moral theology, whereby *Veritatis Splendor* insists that Christian life is first concerned with love, without which following the law is listless. John Paul II's understanding of the drama of the human life, his contribution to personalism, works throughout *Veritatis Splendor*, and acknowledging this offers ways to know more deeply how humans can become transfigured. In particular, his concept of self-determination, or self-making, indicates both the metaphysical underpinnings and aesthetic dimensions of transfiguration. John Paul II speaks of the way that truth and beauty merge for Paul VI, when he considers the importance of Christ's Transfiguration. That is, the theological sense of the aesthetic that Paul VI expresses has Christ as its archetype and concerns the transformation of human life. These observations in turn offer him further insight into how Paul VI can be considered the Pope of the Transfiguration.¹⁹

As a philosopher, Karol Wojtyła is a personalist, who emphasizes both the reality of who we are as humans (this is his metaphysical realism) and the ways in which we experience our relatedness to the world, particularly through human action (this is the phenomenological dimension of his work).²⁰ Developing the concept of intentionality from twentieth-century phenomenology, Wojtyła works with the idea that, through engagement with the world, the human person undertakes a process of self-making.

¹⁹ John Paul II, "Celebrazione Eucaristica in Occasione del XVII Anniversario della Morte di Papa Montini: Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II," Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1995, §4, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19950806_paulo-vi.html.

²⁰ Literature that considers the impact of John Paul II's personalism on *Veritatis Splendor* includes: David S. Crawford, "Experience of Nature, Moral Experience: Interpreting *Veritatis Splendor's* 'Perspective of the Acting Person,'" *Communio* 37 (Summer 2010): 266–82; Jack Healy, "*Veritatis Splendor* and the Human Person," *Linacre Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (1994): 16–26; J. F. Owens, "A Creaturely Ethic: *Veritatis Splendor* and Human Nature," *Linacre Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2000): 11–21.

This is articulated throughout *The Acting Person*. As mentioned above, Wojtyła considers that human action includes both transitive and intransitive dimensions, and both are ultimately crucial to cooperation in divinely bestowed transfiguration. Wojtyła explains that every action has inner and outer dimensions, because the human action always has an object of the will; but at the same time what the will intends affects the human person who is acting. He describes: "Because of self-determination, an action reaches and penetrates into the subject, into the ego, which is its primary and principal object. Parallel with this there comes the transitiveness and intransitiveness of the human action."²¹ In other words, every human action only potentially affects the outer world in a given way; a chosen action can also be ineffective. The aspect of human action that will always be present is the way that moral and immoral action affect the inner world of the human person. Such ongoing inner transformation is at the core of the moral life, and connections between inner and outer arguably form the terrain on which transfiguration can both happen and at the same time become a recognizable dimension of goodness in the world. A Christian who is motivated by love for Christ participates in the life of the Trinity. The light of transfiguration can become a Christian beacon in the world whenever this occurs. As will be shown, Paul VI had made this argument about the importance of daily human decisions and actions in *Ecclesiam Suam*, and John Paul II seems to think along similar lines.

At a conference after the publication of *The Acting Person*, Wojtyła explained the principle of "self-determination" more succinctly, and related it to the work of the Second Vatican Council that was so much the focus of both his and Paul VI's pontificates. Later published in essay form, his address was entitled "The Personal Structure of Self-Determination."²² The piece offers further clarity about how the Pope, as a philosopher, considered the transformative dimensions of the moral life. Wojtyła argues there that whenever I, a human person, act, "I am not only the efficient cause of my acts, but through them I am also in some sense the 'creator of myself.'"²³ More specifically, if I choose for the good, then I become a better person; if I choose for what is evil, then I become worse. In the former case, one might say, formation is occurring; in the latter, the person is becoming

²¹ Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969): 150.

²² Karol Wojtyła, "The Personal Structure of Self-Determination," trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M., in *Person and Community: Selected Essays, Catholic Thought from Lublin* (New York: Peter Lang): 187–95.

²³ Wojtyła, "Personal Structure," 191.

deformed. By extension, when I choose for what is Christ-like, I can become like Christ, and this is the conforming dimension that runs later throughout *Veritatis Splendor*. All of this depends upon the understanding that humans are capable of knowing what is true, and that they are free to choose for what is true, which is to say, good. The encyclical accentuates further that one can also choose for what is beautiful in a deeply personal way: reflecting the splendor of the transfigured Christ. Thus, thinking through the implications of what Wojtyła calls the “dynamic reality of action”²⁴ reveals that humans, through their actions, can either reflect luminescence, or retreat, so that the divine image within the heart of man is “disfigured,”²⁵ because the divine law has been rejected.

Crucial to all this is that, for Wojtyła, a truly human action constitutes a genuine movement of the will toward what one knows to be good or evil. This provides insight into how each person can uniquely participate in Christ’s splendor, by finding out who they are in the light of divine Law. Their lives transmit the light of Christ into the world. All of this can be understood by considering how following the divine law requires outward action that is fully integrated with a Christ-like disposition. Unaided reason cannot tell us that the life of a martyr or a saint is at the same time a moment of personal self-fulfillment, precisely as an imitation of and participation in Christ’s self-giving action during his life, on the Cross, and in his glorious Resurrection and Ascension. This Christian contribution to human self-understanding, which takes as its touchstone the revealed relationship between splendor and the capacities of persons to become Christ-like, can be more clearly known through John Paul II’s insistence on the “ontology” of the human person, within the above-mentioned essay on self-determination. There, he concludes with the reflection that the human person is capable of self-giving only when self-possessing. Such self-possession, he argues, is only possible when one can self-govern—which is to say, when one is virtuous, and capable of moral action.²⁶ The ontology of the human person, and with it the centrality of human freedom, self-determination, and the possibilities of self-giving, are all discernible at the core of *Veritatis Splendor*. Wojtyła’s personalism entails that everything in the encyclical can be read through the ontology of personhood, magnified through the glory of Christ on Mount Tabor. There we see all that humans are called ultimately to become, by leading the Christian life. This calls for personal transfiguration, possible because persons are made to know

²⁴ Wojtyła, “Personal Structure,” 193.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §12.

²⁶ Wojtyła, “Personal Structure,” 194.

and reflect Christ's divine and deeply personal splendor. When they can govern themselves by acting according to a moral law that is true for every human person, they become capable of such splendor, and at the same time of illuminating the world from within. The call to be transfigured is for humans to reveal their inner form through imitating the humanity of Christ, inextricably linked with the life of the Godhead.

Thus, in the same essay on personalist self-determination, it is fitting that Wojtyła refers to §24 of *Gaudium et Spes*, where the fathers of Vatican II state that "the human being, who is the only creature on earth that God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself or herself except through a disinterested gift of himself or herself."²⁷ The cardinal reflects that: "In these words, [the document] sum[s] up the age-old traditions and inquiries of Christian anthropology, for which divine revelation became a liberating light."²⁸ The revelation received through the Person of Christ, then, illuminates what truly fulfills human persons: when they become, in imitation of him, self-giving gifts to the world, they participate in their own making, in God's glorious likeness. Such participation is only possible with the profound realization of what it means to love like Christ. Reading a little further into the same paragraph in *Gaudium et Spes*, one finds that "Love for God and neighbour is the first and greatest commandment. Sacred Scripture, however, teaches us that the love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbour. . . . To men growing daily more dependent on one another, and to a world becoming more unified every day, this truth proves to be of paramount importance."²⁹ In the modern world, then, where persons are interrelated and interdependent, the daily task of self-giving faces newly configured challenges, possibilities, and responsibilities. Rather than becoming thereby overwhelmed, Christians can manifest how they are Christ-like in ways that meet the needs of their time.

Still, the central motivation of the Christian moral life remains unchanged. In becoming Christ-like, each person can bring the splendor of Christ's self-giving love into the world. This is the truly human vocation to become transfigured. In *Veritatis Splendor*, this becomes clear at the only moment when the Pope uses the concept of "transfiguration" in order to further his argument—when he speaks about the martyrs and the saints. In §93, he states that: "By their eloquent and attractive example of a life completely transfigured by the splendour of moral truth, the martyrs

²⁷ Wojtyła, "Personal Structure," 193.

²⁸ Wojtyła, "Personal Structure," 193.

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), Vatican trans. (Strathfield: St Paul's, 2009), §24.

and, in general, all the Church's Saints, light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense." The splendor of truth, then, emanates from the lives of the martyrs and saints, providing a means for the world to remember the true human calling: to be fulfilled, through daily action, in response to the light of God's magnificent love. Such splendor reaches into the darkness only when it has become a matter of daily practice. John Paul II emphasizes this quotidian dimension in *Veritatis Splendor*. He examines human action in its various aspects, accentuating the importance of each. In doing so, he echoes and deepens the work and words of Paul VI.

Pope Paul VI: Pope of the Transfiguration

That John Paul II takes Paul VI as one of the finest models of transfiguration can be discerned from the addresses wherein he speaks about his predecessor, particularly those given on the sixth of August. This section discusses the main ways through which he articulates the case that both Paul VI's life, wherein he focused on the role of the Christian and the Church in the modern world, and the moment of his death shed light on what it means to be transfigured. John Paul consistently details Paul VI's life as exemplary when he reflects on the meaning of Christ's Transfiguration. Homilies and addresses, given on the sixth of August and recorded on the Vatican website, taken from the years 1979, 1980, 1983, 1985, and 1986, and then from 1989 through to 2004 are all considered here.³⁰ John Paul II's understanding of Paul VI as the Pope of the Transfiguration is due to the way that Paul lived his life, the date on which he died, and the weight that he gave to bringing the light of Christ—particularly through focus on morality considerations—throughout his pontificate. More specifically still, Paul VI writes about the Transfiguration in order to understand the meaning of the Christian life; and he issued his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, on that feast day.

The first feast of the Transfiguration that falls within John Paul II's pontificate is in 1979 and is a fitting opening for considering these points. On that date, he gave a homily at the funeral of Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, who had proclaimed the *habemus papam* when, in 1963, Giovanni Montini took the name Paul VI and succeeded to the Chair of Peter. John Paul comments on the divine coincidence that the funeral is taking place on the first anniversary of Paul VI's death. The next year on the same date,

³⁰ Where English translations are available, these are used. Where unavailable, the Italian text is used and translated by the author. All texts are those published on the Vatican website, and are cited as they more specifically arise.

John Paul II gave a general audience at the Castel Gandolfo.³¹ His message focused on how Christ, particularly through the beatitudes, promulgates a “new ethos” from the mount.³² Christ’s law will be one of interiority, he argues, demanding that hard hearts become transformed. A circumcision of the heart is to occur, so that human desires are purified. The Pope argues that the implications of the Sermon on the Mount, for the individual human heart, need to be considered before its more global meaning can be discerned. He adds that he will develop these themes over the coming weeks. Arguably he is already laying some of the groundwork for *Veritatis Splendor*, which is to come thirteen years later.

Quite significantly, when the Pope goes on to speak to the sick in the audience, he recalls the death of Paul VI two years ago and quotes from the Angelus address that his predecessor would have given, had he not passed away in the early hours of that morning in 1978. Over the years, John Paul II reiterates different sections of the same passage from Paul VI’s words. Taken together, the sections that he chooses do not quote the address entirely, but add up to the following (in the order that Paul VI writes them and with ellipses where John Paul II skips sections):

The Transfiguration of the Lord recalled by the Liturgy of today’s solemnity throws a dazzling light on our daily life, and makes us turn our mind to the immortal destiny which that fact foreshadows. . . . It . . . shows that the transcendent destiny of our human nature, which [Christ] assumed for our salvation, is destined to be [due to Christ’s salvific action] “children of the light” (Col. 1,12). That body which is transfigured before the astonished eyes of the apostles, and the body of Christ our brother, is also our body called to glory; that light which bathes [him] is and also will be our share of inheritance and of splendour.³³

The final word in this quotation is impossible to overlook when considering the title of *Veritatis Splendor*. John Paul goes on to reflect on the “grand Pontificate” of Paul VI, whose life was entirely dedicated to the Church.

³¹ John Paul II, General Audience, Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1980, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19800806.html.

³² John Paul II, General Audience, August 6, 1980, §2.

³³ Original text: Paul VI, “Angelus Domini,” August 6, 1978, w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/angelus/1978/documents/hf_p-vi_ang_19780806.html. Where parts have been translated into English in the addresses cited, these have been consulted for this passage.

With Paul VI having passed away on the feast of the Transfiguration, John Paul considers how “Papa Montini” is now with Christ, “alongside Peter and, like Peter,” contemplating the divine glory and reveling in how beautiful and good it is to be there on the Mount.³⁴ John Paul recalls how Paul steered the Church through the difficult times after the Council, ceaselessly articulating its teachings through his catechesis. In particular he highlights Paul’s work in the documents that he names: *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Humanae Vitae* (1968), *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* (1967), *Octagesima Adveniens* (1971), *Marialis Cultis* (1974), *Gaudete in Domino* (1975), and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). Furthermore, he pays tribute to the way that Paul travelled throughout the modern world, bringing Christ’s teachings and love wherever he could. Recalling the moment of Paul’s death, when Christ called him to contemplate his divine glory in eternity, he recalled that, according to witnesses, Paul’s last prayer was the *Pater Noster*. With those he addresses, John Paul II prays that Paul VI is being “flooded with the eternal radiant light.”

In 1983, John Paul gave an address dedicated to the sixth of August as the anniversary of Paul’s death. Therein, he pays tribute to Paul as someone who dedicated his whole life to Truth. The spirit of Paul remains in the Church, argues John Paul, due to the former Pope’s unfailing defense of the faith: he “illuminated the Church and inspired modern society.”³⁵ In particular, John Paul refers to one of the then Giovanni Battista Montini’s texts, “Studium,” where the author meditated on the importance of orthodoxy. Montini reflected there that teaching the Truth of Christ is evermore necessary in a world where Christ is “absent.” Precisely then, Christians need to make him present by proclaiming and living in accord with Truth. That is, in a world where Christ is “deformed” and where humans are “distracted” from their final end of salvation, Christians need to defend orthodoxy. Two years later, John Paul II speaks of Paul VI as a fearless figure who did not close his eyes to the “drama of modern man” but instead responded to the tensions, problems, and agnosticism of his day. This particular address by John Paul II falls on the same date as the fortieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. In this context, John Paul II emphasizes the perennial importance of Paul VI’s proclama-

³⁴ John Paul II, General Audience, August 6, 1980, found in the section “Papa Montini a due anni dalla scomparsa.”

³⁵ Full text: John Paul II, “Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II nel V Anniversario della Morte di Papa Paolo VI, Solennità,” August 6, 1983, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1983/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19830806_v-anniversario-morte-paolo-vi.html.

tion of the need for a “civilization of love.”³⁶

The next of John Paul II’s addresses that overtly refer to Paul VI on the feast of the Transfiguration occurs in 1989. At his Angelus address, John Paul considers the meaning conveyed by the fact that Paul died on this feast day. Namely, this fact sheds light on Paul’s exceptional and quasi-prophetic service to the Church. He can be thought of, John Paul argues, as “the Pope of the Transfiguration.”³⁷ The prophetic nature of his life is underscored by the fact that Paul issued his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, on the feast day that was to mark his death. There, Paul set out the program of his pontificate. The significance of this encyclical for interpreting *Veritatis Splendor* will be considered in the section below. It was a document apparently very much on John Paul II’s mind in 1989, indicated by the fact that at a parish homily on the same day he speaks about it again. He opens by quoting Luke 9:33 and then asks: “What greater joy could there be than to contemplate Christ in his glory? Our eternal beatitude consists precisely in this vision, ‘face to face’ with the incarnate Word, in the light of the Trinity.”³⁸ Contemplating this for a moment longer, he turns again to Paul VI, and speaks of the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*. John Paul considers that exhortation more closely after repeating the quotation from Paul about orthodoxy recalled in 1983 and cited above. Paul VI, John Paul II argues, found joy in his daily participation in the suffering of Christ. Paul VI had stated in *Gaudete in Domino* that, for the Christian, “The humble human joys in our lives, which are like seeds of a higher reality are transfigured.”³⁹ This happens through the Cross and the Paschal mystery. Such joy, so much appreciated by Paul VI, John Paul II designates to be a foretaste of the heavenly Jerusalem.⁴⁰ Again, one finds an emphasis on the spiritual Christian significance of what is seemingly *merely* mundane. John Paul II quotes from the Angelus address of 1978, which Paul VI was not able to deliver, on the day when Christians hope he entered into the heavenly realm. A discussion of *Ecclesiam Suam*—the

³⁶ John Paul II, “Messaggio di Giovanni Paolo II nel VII Anniversario della Morte di Paolo VI e Nel XL del Lancio della Bomba Atomica Su Hiroscima,” Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1985, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850806_due-anniversari.html.

³⁷ John Paul II, “Angelus,” Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1989, §2, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1989/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19890806.html.

³⁸ John Paul II, “Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II” (1989), §1.

³⁹ Paul VI, *Gaudete in Domino* (1975), pt. III, w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19750509_gaudete-in-domino.html.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, “Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II” (1989), §4.

document considered in the section below—takes up almost all of the remainder of this homily, which ends with a prayer that God will help the Church to achieve all that Paul VI had wanted for the people of God.

Homilies and addresses for the next thirteen years, on the sixth of August, consistently refer to Paul VI. John Paul highlights his predecessor's contribution of naming the importance of a "civilization of love," as necessary for the needs of the modern world.⁴¹ The role of the Church in the world is increasingly evident, because in this way not only do Christians become transfigured, but they also make Christ present. This is the continual source of transfiguration within the world. Paul VI modelled how a fruitful exchange can happen between Church and world. He was a living witness of the importance of the Transfiguration, particularly through his life of prayer.⁴² Because Christ was at the core of Paul's entire life, the Pontiff was able to enter "into dialogue with contemporary culture, to make known the power of absolute Christianity, of the truth of the salvation of Christ our Lord."⁴³ Above all then, John Paul's appreciation of Paul's testimony to Christianity, his personal life, comes to the fore. In 1996, he quotes from the work *Testamento di Paolo VI*, where Paul speaks about death as the way that one enters into the light of Christ. Paul's words reveal this deeply held belief in this mystery, which articulates a movement from darkness into light.⁴⁴ The following year, John Paul II quotes from Paul VI's *Pensiero alla Morte*, in which the author declares his love for and dedication to the Church, which Paul speaks of as the underlying secret of his life.⁴⁵

⁴¹ John Paul II, "Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II All'Inizio della Celebrazione nel XV Anniversario della Morte di Paolo VI," Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1993, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1993/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19930806_xv-ann-paolo-vi.html.

⁴² John Paul II, "Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II," (1995), §2.

⁴³ John Paul II, "Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II," (1995), §3.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, "Santa Messa in Suffragio del Servo di Dio Paolo VI, Omelia Di Giovanni Paolo," Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1996), §2, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1996/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19960806_paolo-vi.html.

⁴⁵ "I can say that I have always loved her [the Church]," he wrote in view of his imminent death, "and I believe I have lived for her and for nothing else. But I would like the Church to know it; and that I had the strength to tell her so, as a secret which only at the very end of life one has the courage to reveal" (*Pensiero alla morte*), quoted in John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II on the 19th Anniversary of the Death of Pope Paul VI," August 6, 1997, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1997/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_

In keeping with Paul's evident personal devotion to the Church, in 2001, John Paul explains that Paul's understanding of Transfiguration was theological and anthropological, but also "ecclesial."⁴⁶ This is particularly evident in *Ecclesiam Suam*, and John Paul's focus on that encyclical remains particularly pertinent. It should not be forgotten, though, that any aspect of the Transfiguration is, for John Paul II, first and foremost personal. For, like every dimension of Christian life, it concerns the human relationship with the Son of God. John Paul quotes Paul's desire, found in his personal writings about death, to "in ending . . . be in the light," in keeping with the mystery that the whole world is "a reverberation, a reflection of the one and only light."⁴⁷ That desire is inextricable, for Paul, from his longing that the Church might stand in the light of the divine mystery of Christ. She, here reflecting both Christ and the good Christian life, is in a constant dynamic activity of transfiguration. This is how she conveys the light of Christ in the world. The human call, divinely inspired and sustained, is toward such splendor, and this participation in Christ's glory is only possible when one lives according to the new ethos, which Christ offers us from the mount. Paul VI echoes this divine teaching about the moral life, by focusing on an orthodox understanding of how to live one's life. This is evident in his encyclicals which focus on moral issues—it is no coincidence that John Paul II quotes from and refers to *Humanae Vitae*, in particular, throughout *Veritatis Splendor*.⁴⁸ More pertinent though, is that the address of 1989 reveals that another of Paul VI's encyclicals informs John Paul II's understanding of transfiguration and the splendor toward which all humans are called.

spe_19970806_paolo-vi.html.

⁴⁶ He quotes a statement from *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1972, where Paul declares: "I wish . . . you were able to glimpse in the Church the light she bears within herself, to see the Church transfigured, to see, that is, what the Council set out so clearly in its documents. . . . [The Church] contains . . . a deep, immense and divine mystery. . . . The Church is the sacrament, the tangible sign of a hidden reality, that is the presence of God among us" (quoted in John Paul II, "Address of John Paul II, Mass on the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord," August 6, 2001, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010806_trasfigurazione-signore.html).

⁴⁷ This audience honored both the centennial of Pope St. Pius X's election to the papacy and the anniversary of Pope Paul VI's death (John Paul II, General Audience, Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 2003, §3, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20030806.html).

⁴⁸ See footnote 15 above.

Paul VI and *Ecclesiam Suam*

The way in which Catholics, when they live according to the moral law, contribute to that radiating source of light, can be more clearly seen when *Veritatis Splendor* is read according to what Paul VI says about the relationship between Catholics and the world in *Ecclesiam Suam*. As has been emphasized, that encyclical was also issued on the sixth of August, almost thirty years before *Veritatis Splendor*; taken together, these documents can be read as an extended discussion of how Christians can transfigure the world by being transformed by Christ and then bringing Christ's love, through their lives, into the world.

Paul VI wrote *Ecclesiam Suam* in 1964, toward the relative end of the Second Vatican Council. While distinguishing what he says from the work of the Council, he reminds his fellow bishops of the distinctive and irreplaceable role of the Church in the world.⁴⁹ Specifically, he warns that to be a Christian does not mean adopting—one might say, conforming to—the norms that the world has to offer. This term, “the world,” he explains, pertains to:

either those human beings who are opposed to the light of faith and the gift of grace, those whose naive optimism betrays them into thinking that their own energies suffice to win them complete, lasting, and gainful prosperity, or, finally, those who take refuge in an aggressively pessimistic outlook on life and maintain that their vices, weaknesses and moral ailments are inevitable, incurable, or perhaps even desirable as sure manifestations of personal freedom and sincerity.⁵⁰

Contrasts between the “world” and the life toward which the Christian is called are not to be underestimated, particularly in the domain of morality. Strikingly, Paul asserts that in living according to the law, the Christian will be freer than those of the world. The true freedom that Paul discusses only briefly and that John Paul elaborates in *Veritatis Splendor*, is that of the person living according to the objectively good and fulfilling moral law. False freedom denies both faith and grace, in one way or another; and only darkness can follow. It denies the capacity for human nature to flourish into its splendid form.

Paul offers an image through which to understand the essential role of the Church in a world that extols false freedom, by writing that God

⁴⁹ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §§6–7.

⁵⁰ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §59.

has “placed”⁵¹ Catholics at the center of four concentric circles. The first and outermost of these is that of mankind, which includes everyone in the human race, including those of the “world” who are atheists, some of whom are unwilling to enter into dialogue with the Church. The Church constantly has a role to play in this world, for the Pontiff asserts that “all things human are our concern.” He goes on to say:

There are moral values of the utmost importance which we have to offer [the world]. These are of advantage to everyone. We root them firmly in the consciences of men. Wherever men are striving to understand themselves and the world, we are able to communicate with them. Wherever the councils of nations come together to establish the rights and duties of man, we are honored to be permitted to take our place among them. If there is in man a “soul that is naturally Christian,” we wish to respect it, to cherish it, and to communicate with it.⁵²

Thus, the Church is not to dissociate itself from the world, but unabashedly to extend what the world cannot find on its own: the love and the law of Christ. Without such work, which fundamentally occurs whenever a Christian follows Christ’s law to love God by loving neighbor, Christ’s light cannot permeate where it is most needed.

The second circle comes closer to the heart of Christianity, and comprises those who worship one God, with whom Catholics agree on some but not all points. These include Jews, Muslims, and some of the Afro-Asiatic religions.⁵³ Christians form the third circle; these are believers in Christ who do not accept the principles of unity that the Catholic Church embodies—including that of the papacy.⁵⁴ The final circle is that of Catholics, who are united together because, faithful to the Church, they follow the law of Christ. Here, Paul emphasizes the virtues of humility and obedience, through which Catholics accept that the Church preserves and promulgates that law, enabling all baptized to live the life of Christ. To accept the teaching of the Church is to open oneself to the transfiguring light of Christ’s love.⁵⁵

Paul’s image, or model, of concentric but at the same time intersecting

⁵¹ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §96.

⁵² Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §97.

⁵³ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §§107–08.

⁵⁴ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §§109–12.

⁵⁵ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §§113–15.

circles, is remarkable in several ways. It teaches that, while Catholics bear marks that distinguish them from others in the world, they are not separate from it. Catholics are not outsiders or offsidiers; they are at the heart of all that is human. Their distinctiveness lies in their capacity to dwell at the center, and to illuminate from within the true meaning in human desires, needs, and concerns. That meaning is the splendor of Truth: Christ. Each Catholic is called to live out the promise of such splendor, through the grace of baptism. Elsewhere in the same document, Paul speaks about baptism as a gift that

... thrills the baptized person to the very core of his being. He must look upon it with the eyes of the Christians of the early Church, as an "illumination" which draws down upon his soul the life-giving radiance of divine truth, opens heaven to him, and sheds upon this mortal life that light which enables him to walk as a child of the light toward the vision of God, the wellspring of eternal happiness.⁵⁶

Paul's language of illumination, which John Paul uses in *Veritatis Splendor*, becomes another consideration of the meaning of transfiguration. Taking both encyclicals together, we might say that the gift of baptism enables a response to the moral law by which a person is self-possessing, and therefore capable of self-giving. The grace of baptism shines a light both on who the person is, in the light—or life—of Christ, through his Church, and at the same time, on the human vocation to be a child of the light: Christ-like. That potential to give oneself as a gift is the human vocation to be splendid. The charity that Paul and John Paul extol, which is the life of Christ in unity with Father and Holy Spirit, is self-fulfilling and transformative; it transfigures. Self-giving is, in its own way, a gift from Christ. Through him, our transfiguration is possible. Through him, our joy can be complete, as the human form becomes more integrated with the form of Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor. Such perfection happens after humans, as John Paul says in §13 of *Veritatis Splendor*, accept the commands of the Decalogue, as a first point on the way to properly human freedom. Having become free in this way, our capacities as persons open onto a new horizon, where the inner center illuminates us and at the same time the world.

This, then, is the selfless self-actualization that can transform the world at the same time that it transforms us. A well-lived life—one lived in participation with Christ—can illuminate the world, offering it possibilities it would not otherwise see. Paul and John Paul claim that this

⁵⁶ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §39.

happens precisely when the Catholics refuse to capitulate to the false view of human freedom and fulfilment, and instead uphold the ontology of the human person. Christianity speaks for all humans; but words mean little if lives are not luminous. John Paul echoes his predecessor in *Veritatis Splendor*, quoting some of those definite statements from *Humanae Vitae* that highlight the importance of the moral life. He also refers to Paul's "Address to Members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer" in 1967, in which Paul reprimands anyone who embraces "depraved moral relativism" by holding that the Church has changed her teaching about "intrinsically evil" moral acts. This, Paul says, "clearly endangers the Church's entire doctrinal heritage."⁵⁷ That heritage is, according to Paul VI, the Church's gift to the world, expressed in lives that are lived courageously in accordance with truth.⁵⁸ This Christian way of life, the subject of moral theology, is not an area that he chooses to elaborate on in *Ecclesiam Suam*, because he does not have the space to do so, and because his readers are "in any case . . . well aware of the moral needs of our time."⁵⁹ This space is one that *Veritatis Splendor* seeks to fill, responding in particular to the imagery of light in *Ecclesiam Suam* and prevalent throughout John Paul II's understanding of transfiguration, mediated by his contemplation of Papa Montini's life and pontificate.

Veritatis Splendor at the Center of *Ecclesiam Suam* and of the Christian Life

From all this one finds that when examining *Veritatis Splendor* together with *Ecclesiam Suam* and other aspects of Paul's life and pontificate, several facets of the significance of transfiguration emerge. They come together to suggest that the moral life John Paul describes is the same as that which Paul VI alludes to in *Ecclesiam Suam*. That is, John Paul focuses on the kind of life that Christians need to lead, in order for transfiguration of self and world, in the light of Christ's divine Transfiguration, to occur. He essentially fleshes out Paul VI's insistence that daily life, and therefore mundane decisions, are at the heart of human transfiguration. It is worthwhile to spell out, here, why Paul VI chooses not to analyze those everyday matters more closely in *Ecclesiam Suam*. Namely, in §52, he states:

We realize that it would take Us too long to describe here, even in barest outline, the way in which the Christian life should be lived

⁵⁷ Footnote 131 in *Veritatis Splendor*.

⁵⁸ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §51.

⁵⁹ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §52.

today, and We have no intention of embarking on such an undertaking now. In any case, you are well aware of the moral needs of our time, and you will not cease in your efforts to bring the faithful to a realization of the dignity, the purity and the seriousness of the Christian life.

In other words, the scope of his encyclical is already too great, and the working out of contemporary moral theology will need to wait for later. Nonetheless, Paul does state two main points about the moral lives of Catholics: that they must embrace a spirit of poverty and reject the world's emphasis on wealth;⁶⁰ and they must recognize that the moral life is one of charity. This comes again to the main concerns of *Veritatis Splendor*, which seeks for freedom in a life of the spirit, motivated by love and drawn toward divine light. "We are convinced," Paul says, that:

Charity should today assume its rightful, foremost position in the scale of religious and moral values—and not just in theory, but in the practice of the Christian life. And this applies not only to the charity we show toward God who has poured out the abundance of His love upon us, but also to the charity which we in turn should lavish on our brothers, the whole human race. Charity is the key to everything. It sets all to rights. There is nothing which charity cannot achieve and renew. Charity "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." Who is there among us who does not realize this? And since we realize it, is not this the time to put it into practice?⁶¹

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II explicates how to put charity into practice in the moral life, in his extended discussion of Christ's encounter with the rich young man. Interestingly, *Veritatis Splendor* does not thereby exhaust John Paul II's own understanding of how Christian life is the work of everyday transfiguration. In at least two other documents, *Vita Consecrata* and *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, he considers daily Christian morality. These documents offer the opportunity for a final reflection on the role that transfiguration plays in finding one's way to Christ.

From all that has now been discussed, evidently to consider Christ transfigured is, in one significant respect, to think of his illumination of the moral life. In §§13–16 of *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul points out that

⁶⁰ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §§54–55.

⁶¹ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, §56.

the mount—where we see Christ in his glory—is the place from which the Lord teaches about the moral life. This splendid encounter with Christ in his glory is one in which, John Paul argues in 1995, Jesus “reveals the dimension of glory that is properly of the Son of God, because he emerges with the fullness of his true humanity, according to his will of the love of the father, in his life on the cross.”⁶² Such glory might seem overpowering and beyond our reach; and yet both Popes considered here think that humans are called precisely to participate in this divine manifestation.

One way of doing so is, of course, through prayer, and this becomes evident in John Paul II’s meditation on the Transfiguration, when he offers to the Church the Mysteries of Light of the Rosary. That is, the link between the Transfiguration, splendor, and the moral life is captured in *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, where in 2002 John Paul says that every Christian is called to look continually upon the face of Christ, and to find how that “mystery” is present “amid the daily events and the sufferings of . . . human life.”⁶³ Splendor ultimately refers to that sense of quotidian commitment, and is linked to the drama of human action, lived in loving, self-giving response to the objective moral law. It begins, though, with an encounter with Christ in his full humanity: glorified on Mount Tabor, calling us to participate in the fullness of life.

John Paul II thinks that Paul VI was a great pontiff because he made contemplation of Christ in his glory a focal point of his entire life. As *Veritatis Splendor* also argues, the moral life begins with an encounter with Christ. That encounter may make certain demands, but the relationship with Christ establishes the freedom of the Christian life which continually unfolds in all its richness—and light enters into and then radiates from the human heart. Another way John Paul extends this reflection is in his analysis of how human vocation is a participation in transfiguration. Christian marriage, he argues for instance, is the transfiguration of the Old Covenant of the marriage law.⁶⁴ Particularly striking is the discussion of vocation in *Vita Consecrata* (1996),⁶⁵ a document replete with twen-

⁶² John Paul II, “Celebrazione Eurstica in Occasione del XVII Anniversario della Morte di Papa Montini, Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II,” Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 1995, §2, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19950806_paulo-vi.html.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), §9, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae.html.

⁶⁴ John Paul II, “God’s Gift of Life and Love: On Marriage and the Eucharist,” *Communio* 41 (Summer 2014): 462–71.

⁶⁵ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_

ty-nine instances of variations of the term “transfigure.” This exhortation contemplates the mystery of Christ’s Transfiguration, in order to show how those who consecrate their lives to Christ’s service can change the world through participating in that mystery. It should now be unsurprising that John Paul II’s thinking is very much aligned with Paul VI’s model of the Christian life illuminating the world from its center. This entails responding to divine teachings from the mount: responding both to the Decalogue and to the Beatitudes. John Paul argues that: “A particular duty of the consecrated life is to *remind the baptized of the fundamental values of the Gospel*, by bearing ‘splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes.’”⁶⁶ Those who choose the path of consecrated life serve to remind of how each Christian is called to participate in Christ’s Transfiguration. Such a way of life is freeing, and fulfilling.

Paul VI and John Paul II both maintain that the glory of the Transfiguration is something in which Christians participate when they respond to the moral law. Contemplation of Christ on Mount Tabor is at the center of the human movement toward splendor. The splendor of Truth is, for John Paul II, the revelation of the form of the human person: when humans respond to Christ’s teaching, they can participate in the fulfillment of humanity. Paul VI considered that this is the main way in which Christians can bring the light of Christ into the world. Illuminating the importance and then the intricacies of responding to Christ the Teacher on a daily basis, both Paul and John Paul, each in his own way, articulate the splendor of everyday Christian life. Perhaps, after all, both Paul VI and John Paul II can be considered Popes of the Transfiguration. 

exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html.

⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §33.