

Veritatis Splendor and the Rupture between Faith and Morals

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ACCORDING TO LIVIO MELINA, in *Veritatis Splendor* John Paul II sought to address two ruptures in contemporary moral theology: that between freedom and truth, and between faith and morals.¹ In this article, following a brief exposition of the first rupture, the second rupture will be analyzed in detail. It will be contended that the second rupture occurs in two modes: the first can be summarized as a focus on faith which fails to translate into a lived pursuit of holiness (faith without morals), and the second as an approach to morality which claims religious neutrality and denies the importance of faith (morals without faith). Although both these modes of the second rupture are regarded as inadequate in *Veritatis Splendor*, they continue to affect Catholic moral theology today. John Paul II, however, critiques both modes of the rupture, and, seeking to overcome the rift, presents an alternate vision of a unitive approach to faith and morals, which has a deeply biblical foundation.

The first rupture addressed by John Paul II—that between freedom and truth—is immediately evident even from a cursory reading of *Veritatis Splendor*. In fact, it is possible to claim that the main theme of the encyclical is a very clear and deliberate attempt to heal the rift between freedom and truth prevalent in society today. This theme is evident not only in *Veritatis Splendor*, but as a leitmotif throughout John Paul II's papacy. In his very first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, which set the

¹ Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 3–4.

tone for his entire pontificate, John Paul II wrote:

Jesus Christ meets the man of every age, including our own, with the same words: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world. Today also, even after two thousand years, we see Christ as the one who brings man freedom based on truth, frees man from what curtails, diminishes and as it were breaks off this freedom at its root, in man's soul, his heart and his conscience. What a stupendous confirmation of this has been given and is still being given by those who, thanks to Christ and in Christ, have reached true freedom and have manifested it even in situations of external constraint!²

Hence, Cardinal Avery Dulles observation that "the rootedness of freedom in truth has been a constant and central theme in the writings of John Paul II"³ seems well founded.

However, in *Veritatis Splendor* John Paul II himself contextualizes this rupture between freedom and truth as a symptom of a more fundamental rupture: that between faith and morality. In §88, he writes:

The attempt to set freedom in opposition to truth, and indeed to separate them radically, is the consequence, manifestation and consummation of *another more serious and destructive dichotomy, that which separates faith from morality.*

The dichotomy between faith and morals has a multitude of manifestations apart from the rupture between freedom and truth. John Paul II gesticulates to two of these in the paragraphs following the statement just quoted: "In a widely dechristianized culture, the criteria employed by believers themselves in making judgments and decisions often appear extraneous or even contrary to those of the Gospel."⁴ This problem can be

² John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), §12.

³ Avery Dulles, "John Paul II and the Truth About Freedom," *First Things*, August, 1995, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/08/004-john-paul-ii-and-the-truth-about-freedom>.

⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §88.

referred to as a morality which does not recognize the essential foundation that a living faith furnishes for a Christian morality, or, in other words, a morality without faith. John Paul II continues, also emphasizing the necessity also to address the opposite problem, which consists of an attitude to the faith which does not translate into the moral life. Against such a paradigm, he writes:

Faith is a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and *a truth to be lived out*. A word, in any event, is not truly received until it passes into action, until it is put into practice. Faith is a decision involving one's whole existence. It is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6). It entails an act of trusting abandonment to Christ, which enables us to live as he lived (cf. Gal 2:20), in profound love of God and of our brothers and sisters.⁵

Adopting the exegetical approach towards *Veritatis Splendor* proposed by John Paul II himself in §88 of the encyclical, let us now turn to a deeper analysis of these two direct manifestations of the rupture between faith and morality: a faith without morals, and a morality without faith.

Faith Without Morals

First let us explore the attitude of faith without moral content. A preeminent example of an approach to the Christian faith and morality is a radical version of the “fundamental option” theory, which John Paul II addresses within the encyclical. He explains the logic undergirding the “fundamental option” theory, and theories like it, very early on in the encyclical. In §4, he writes:

An opinion is frequently heard which questions the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality, as if membership in the Church and her internal unity were to be decided on the basis of faith alone, while in the sphere of morality a pluralism of opinions and of kinds of behavior could be tolerated, these being left to the judgement of the individual subjective conscience or to the diversity of social and cultural contexts.

The theory of “fundamental option” had been proposed decades before the

⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §88.

promulgation of *Veritatis Splendor* and, in 1966, had been lauded by Richard McCormick as “one of the most fruitful areas of recent scientific analysis”⁶ in moral theology. This focus on the “scientific” character of moral theology was in response to the Second Vatican Council’s call that “special care . . . be given to the perfecting of moral theology,” and, in particular, that “its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world.”⁷ Fundamental option theory aimed to unite the morality found in the Gospels with the lived experiences of contemporary Christians. McCormick described the theory as follows:

The term “fundamental option” is used by theologians to refer to the free determination of oneself with regard to the totality of existence, the fundamental choice between love of self and love of the saving Lord. Because man’s eternal salvation, his basic position for or against the God of salvation, is at stake in such choices, they must involve a man’s total disposition of himself, out of the radical center of his being. Since this is the case, these choices will involve a depth of the person’s being beyond formulating (or reflex) consciousness, and hence will escape adequate conceptual formulation.⁸

While as early as 1966, McCormick was almost unqualifiedly enthusiastic about the exciting new promises of fundamental option, by 1973, he had somewhat nuanced his approval of the theory. In fact, he had turned to agree, with qualification, with Enda McDonagh, who wrote that the fundamental option is not the effect of one grand and unrepeatable choice, but that our everyday choices also have an effect on this fundamental option.⁹ This developed understanding of fundamental option is closer to John Paul II’s analysis in *Veritatis Splendor* than the earlier radical accounts of the theory.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II recognizes that there is a “fundamental option” that the Christian must choose in order to live as a Christian and live a Christian moral life. He writes,

⁶ Richard McCormick, “Current Theology: 1965,” in *Notes on Moral Theology: 1965 through 1980* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 70.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius* (1965), §16.

⁸ McCormick, “Current Theology: 1965,” 70–71.

⁹ See Edna McDonagh, “The Moral Subject,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (1972): 3–22.

There is no doubt that Christian moral teaching, even in its Biblical roots, acknowledges the specific importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is a question of the decision of faith, of the *obedience of faith* (cf. Rom 16:26) by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering “the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals.”¹⁰

In other words, John Paul II agrees with the proponents of “fundamental option” theory that a scientific—and therefore biblical—understanding of moral theology must take this “fundamental option” into consideration. However, he also acknowledges that a radical version of the theory has significant problems and stands in contradiction to Gospel morality. He addresses what he claims to be the most significant problem faced by the “fundamental option” theory as follows:

*A distinction thus comes to be introduced between the fundamental option and deliberate choices of a concrete kind of behavior. In some authors this division tends to become a separation, when they expressly limit moral “good” and “evil” to the transcendental dimension proper to the fundamental option, and describe as “right” or “wrong” the choices of particular “innerworldly” kinds of behavior: those, in other words, concerning man’s relationship with himself, with others and with the material world. There thus appears to be established within human acting a clear disjunction between two levels of morality: on the one hand the order of good and evil, which is dependent on the will, and on the other hand specific kinds of behavior, which are judged to be morally right or wrong only on the basis of a technical calculation of the proportion between the “pre-moral” or “physical” goods and evils which actually result from the action. This is pushed to the point where a concrete kind of behavior, even one freely chosen, comes to be considered as a merely physical process, and not according to the criteria proper to a human act. The conclusion to which this eventually leads is that the properly moral assessment of the person is reserved to his fundamental option, prescinding in whole or in part from his choice of particular actions, of concrete kinds of behavior.*¹¹

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §66.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §65.

The problem identified here by the Pope is the very troubling rupture between faith and morality that lies at the heart of a radical “fundamental option” theory. At its core, this theory claims that, on the one hand, good and evil applies only in the transcendental realm of faith, and on the other, in the existential realm of lived experience—the moral realm—the human person cannot make truly good or evil choices, only right and wrong decisions.

In contrast to this radical “fundamental option” theory and seeking to heal this rift between faith and morals intensified by it, John Paul II argues that it is necessary to recognize that the choices a person makes, and the acts he or she carries out, impact and transform that person’s “fundamental option.” Their choice for or against God is not a transcendent, immutable choice which remains firmly in place regardless of the everyday choices one makes. In fact, according to John Paul II, the contrary is true. While he agrees that there is a “fundamental option,” he emphatically maintains that this “fundamental option” is really affected by choices and acts. He writes,

It thus needs to be stated that *the so-called fundamental option, to the extent that it is distinct from a generic intention* and hence one not yet determined in such a way that freedom is obligated, *is always brought into play through conscious and free decisions*. Precisely for this reason, *it is revoked when man engages his freedom in conscious decisions to the contrary, with regard to morally grave matter*.¹²

There is a real and important synergy between faith and morality that the radical “fundamental option” theory fails to acknowledge. While faith consists of a radical union with Christ, this union can be strengthened or weakened, and even destroyed, through the free decisions of the human person. Hence, in the words of John Paul II, it must always be maintained that “faith also possesses a moral content. It gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment.”¹³

The fundamental option for Christ gives rise to certain ethical demands and a certain manner of life. Denying this connection, as the radical “fundamental option” theory does, leads to an approach to morality that is in direct contradiction with the Gospel. John Paul II emphasizes that:

The Apostles decisively rejected any separation between the commit-

¹² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §67.

¹³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §89.

ment of the heart and the actions which express or prove it (cf. 1 Jn 2:3–6). And ever since Apostolic times the Church's Pastors have unambiguously condemned the behavior of those who fostered division by their teaching or by their actions.¹⁴

Later in the encyclical, John Paul II elaborates on the problem of separating faith and morals in a manner that denies the necessity to live according to Christian moral norms if one upholds the fundamental option for Christ. He writes,

In their desire, however, to keep the moral life in a Christian context, certain moral theologians have introduced a sharp distinction, contrary to Catholic doctrine, between an *ethical order*, which would be human in origin and of value for *this world* alone, and an *order of salvation*, for which only certain intentions and interior attitudes regarding God and neighbor would be significant. This has then led to an actual denial that there exists, in Divine Revelation, a specific and determined moral content, universally valid and permanent. The word of God would be limited to proposing an exhortation, a generic paraenesis, which the autonomous reason alone would then have the task of completing with normative directives which are truly "objective," that is, adapted to the concrete historical situation. Naturally, an autonomy conceived in this way also involves the denial of a specific doctrinal competence on the part of the Church and her Magisterium with regard to particular moral norms which deal with the so-called "human good." Such norms would not be a part of the proper content of Revelation, and would not in themselves be relevant for salvation.¹⁵

For John Paul II, the synergy between faith and morals means that, contrary to the proponents of a radical "fundamental option" theory, there is "a specific and determined moral content, universally valid and permanent" that is particular to Christianity. There is something unique in Christian morality that sets it apart from secular and rationalistic theories. Denying that one's moral choices have any impact on one's faith—upholding a radical "fundamental option"—leads to an obscuring of this foundational truth.

While the radical "fundamental option" theory may have lost popu-

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §26.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §37.

larity following *Veritatis Splendor* and does not seem to be advocated by many moral theologians today, its main tenets continue in an alternate guise. This is evident in the juxtaposition of the so-called “pastoral” approach over against the doctrinal moral teaching of the Church. Proponents of a pastoral approach which is not necessarily aligned with the perennial moral teaching of the Church are likely to be operating according to a covert radical “fundamental option” model. In order to advocate for pastoral practices which are not in harmony with doctrinal moral teaching, doctrine is relegated to the transcendental level, what we could refer to as the level of “fundamental option.” On the other hand, the pastoral level is the existential level of lived morality, which, according to these theorists, does not necessarily impact on one’s faith.¹⁶ It is easy to see the correspondence here between this so-called pastoral approach and the radical “fundamental option” theory condemned by John Paul II. The following passage from the encyclical, although written twenty-five years ago, reads as if it could have been written today in order to address the so-called “pastoral” approach:

Some authors have proposed a kind of double status of moral truth. Beyond the doctrinal and abstract level, one would have to acknowledge the priority of a certain more concrete existential consideration. The latter, by taking account of circumstances and the situation, could legitimately be the basis of certain *exceptions to the general rule* and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called “pastoral” solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a “creative” hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept.¹⁷

¹⁶ On this problem, Melina writes, “Some have spoken of a latent, but nonetheless real, ‘moral schism,’ through which an every-increasing number of the faithful and of pastors, while not openly contesting ‘official’ teaching, keep their distance from it, no longer granting it the value of a criterion decisive for Church membership” (*Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 16).

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §56.

In the separation of the pastoral from the doctrinal we see a repetition of the problem found in the radical “fundamental option” theory, namely, a hermetic separation between faith and morality, and a relegation of faith to a transcendental realm so that what is done and chosen in life ultimately is believed to have no effect on one’s faith and doctrinal beliefs. Against both of these manifestations of what is ultimately the same problem, that is, the attempt to hold a faith that makes no moral demands, John Paul II emphatically claims:

No damage must be done to the *harmony between faith and life: the unity of the Church* is damaged not only by Christians who reject or distort the truths of faith but also by those who disregard the moral obligations to which they are called by the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 5:9–13).¹⁸

Morals Without Faith

Let us now turn to the second part of this paper and approach the rupture from the other side. The rift between faith and morals can also be manifested in the opposite manner than that proposed by a radical “fundamental option” theory. Rather than seeking to ground Christianity in a transcendental faith and minimize the importance of moral choices, some theologians have focused excessively on the moral aspects of Christianity to the extent that they minimize the importance of faith in rendering the Christian moral life unique and essentially different from secular moral proposals. John Paul II expresses his concern with this approach to moral theology as follows:

Some people, however, disregarding the dependence of human reason on Divine Wisdom and the need, given the present state of fallen nature, for Divine Revelation as an effective means for knowing moral truths, even those of the natural order, have actually posited a *complete sovereignty of reason* in the domain of moral norms regarding the right ordering of life in this world. Such norms would constitute the boundaries for a merely “human” morality; they would be the expression of a law which man in an autonomous manner lays down for himself and which has its source exclusively in human reason. In no way could God be considered the Author of this law, except in the sense that human reason exercises its autonomy in setting down laws by virtue of a primordial and total

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §26.

mandate given to man by God. These trends of thought have led to a denial, in opposition to Sacred Scripture (cf. Mt 15:3–6) and the Church's constant teaching, of the fact that the natural moral law has God as its author, and that man, by the use of reason, participates in the eternal law, which it is not for him to establish.¹⁹

This inclination in moral thought has been a trend present in Catholic theology for centuries. Melina traces this desire to provide a rational basis for morality that does not take into consideration any aspect of the faith back to the second half of the sixteenth century. During that time, according to the work of Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, the wars of religion fragmented the Christian universe and led contemporaries to turn to "reason as the sole source of universal moral evidence."²⁰ This led to a reworking of natural law theory by Hugo Grotius that would be valid "even if it were granted that God does not exist."²¹ Ultimately, this attempt to divorce morality from all aspects of faith culminated in the work of Immanuel Kant, who claimed that "Christian morality . . . is the expression of truly universal ethical demands, valid for *all* men of *all* times," but only if the rational content is detached from "every historical reference to and from faith in the person of Jesus."²²

This historical background is essential to help us understand the Catholic moral theology of the 1970s and 1980s. Melina explains that "postconciliar theology . . . follows the path that seeks a universal communicability based exclusively on reason."²³ He continues, "the specifically Christian

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §36. John Paul II acknowledges that the desire to explain the rationality of Christian morality is undergirded by positive concerns: "In response to the encouragement of the Second Vatican Council, there has been a desire to foster dialogue with modern culture, emphasizing the rational—and thus universally understandable and communicable—character of moral norms belonging to the sphere of the natural moral law. There has also been an attempt to reaffirm the interior character of the ethical requirements deriving from that law, requirements which create an obligation for the will only because such an obligation was previously acknowledged by human reason and, concretely, by personal conscience" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §36). However, he is concerned by the over-emphasis on the rational character of moral norms at the expense of recognizing the foundational situatedness of all morality within faith.

²⁰ Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 21.

²¹ Hugo Grotius, *De iure ac pacis*, proleg. no. 11: "esti daretur Deum non esse" (cited in Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 21).

²² Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 21.

²³ Livio Melina, "Christ and the Dynamism of Action: Outlook and Overview of Christocentrism in Moral Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review*

dimension of action is put between parentheses or relegated to a transcendental level,"²⁴ and, later in the same article, he writes:

The heavy emphasis on the rational and universal character of morality, the adoption of a Kantian notion of autonomy, and the prevalent attention granted to the human behavioral sciences led to a bracketing, if not an outright elimination, of the specifically Christian element in morality. What occurred was a "secularisation of morality," which was cut off from the determinative influence of faith: its epistemological character as a specifically theological science was undermined in both its sources and its method.²⁵

Thus, on the one hand, while John Paul II must respond to a radical "fundamental option" theory that relegates faith to the transcendental sphere that cannot be substantially altered by one's moral choices, on the other hand he must address the trend in moral theology that seeks to ground Catholic morality purely on natural reason divorced from faith. Ultimately these two problems are two sides of the same coin. They are both manifestations of the same problematic rupture between faith and morals.

John Paul II addresses the trend towards a de-Christianised rational moral theology in three ways. First, in §9 of *Veritatis Splendor*, he emphasizes that goodness has its ontological source in God, and therefore any theory that divorces morality from God, divorces morality from goodness, and is therefore ultimately rendered unintelligible. Morality is based on the question of what is good, and, according to John Paul II, "*only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself.*"²⁶ Furthermore, "*to ask about the good, in fact, ultimately means to turn towards God, the fullness of goodness.*"²⁷ Ultimately, "the goodness that attracts and at the same time obliges man has its source in God, and indeed is God himself."²⁸ God alone is "goodness, fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness."²⁹ A morality based purely on human reason and closed to transcendental reality fails to recognize that God is the supreme goodness that every human heart longs for. Hence, John Paul II writes that:

28 (2001): 119.

²⁴ Melina, "Christ and the Dynamism of Action," 119.

²⁵ Melina, "Christ and the Dynamism of Action," 124.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §9.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §9.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §9.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §9.

Only God, the Supreme Good, constitutes the unshakable foundation and essential condition of morality, and thus of the commandments, particularly those negative commandments which always and in every case prohibit behavior and actions incompatible with the personal dignity of every man.³⁰

John Paul II's line of reasoning is consonant with the conclusion expressed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who, in affirming the observation of Leszek Kolakowski, pithily stated: "When there is no God, there is no morality and, in fact, no mankind either."³¹

Second, but related to the first point, John Paul II firmly situates natural law within the divine, eternal law. In contrast to Grotius' project mentioned above, John Paul II concurs with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1987 document *Donum Vitae*, from which he quotes the following passage:

[Natural law] cannot be thought of as simply a set of norms on the biological level; rather it must be defined as the rational order whereby man is called by the Creator to direct and regulate his life and actions and in particular to make use of his own body.³²

John Paul II also draws attention to the writings of Leo XIII, who emphasized the "*essential subordination of reason and human law to the Wisdom of God and to his law*,"³³ and who wrote that "all prescriptions of human reason can have force of law only inasmuch as they are the voice and the interpreters of some higher power on which our reason and liberty necessarily depend."³⁴ The human person cannot act as a supreme law-giver to himself, even if the human law corresponds to his or her own nature, but must receive the law from above, from an authority with the competence to give the law. As Elizabeth Anscombe explained in her landmark 1958 paper, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in a society that fails to recognize God as lawgiver, moral obligations no longer hold.³⁵ Natural law retains

³⁰ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §99.

³¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 68.

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, *Donum Vitae* (1987), Introduction.3 ("Anthropology and Procedures in the Biomedical Field").

³³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §44.

³⁴ Leo XIII, *Libertas* (1888), §8.

³⁵ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 6.

its internal logic only by being situated within the eternal law. Thus, as Matthew Levering wrote in 2008:

Law has its ground in God, not in human beings. Our participated wisdom cannot be understood without adverting to its divine source. We do not constitute wisdom, but rather we receive it by seeking to discern and participate in it.³⁶

Ultimately, for John Paul II, “*acknowledging the Lord as God is the very core, the heart of the Law*, from which the particular precepts flow and towards which they are ordered.”³⁷ Through emphasising the intrinsic link between natural and eternal law, he sets the trajectory for moral theology to cease striving for a rational natural law theory that excludes God, but rather to recognize natural law’s situation within the rich context of God’s constant loving and wise relationship with humanity.³⁸

Finally, the third way that John Paul II addresses the problematic trend toward a de-Christianised rational moral theology is by affirming that there is a radical newness to Christian morality that exceeds all secular moral codes based on human reason alone.³⁹ This newness of Christian morality consists in the incorporation of the human person into the life of Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit whose impulses transform the moral life from within, and the vocation to eternal beatitude made possible by Christ’s redemption. John Paul II’s insights into this radical newness of Christian morality in *Veritatis Splendor* can be read as an extended commentary on the second chapter of St Paul’s letter to the Colossians, and particularly, his exhortation that:

³⁶ Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §11.

³⁸ This trajectory has been recognized and developed by several Catholic theologians since 1993. For example, Tracey Rowland writes: “Catholic scholars need to go beyond a theologically neutered conception of natural law as a *lingua franca* with which to engage proponents of hostile traditions. . . . The Church’s scholars should not waste their energies performing all manner of linguistic gymnastics, transposing her teachings into the idioms of hostile traditions, in order to entice neo-pagan elites to buy their intellectual package” (“Natural Law: From Neo-Thomism to Nuptial Mysticism,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 35, no. 3 [2008]: 394–95).

³⁹ John Paul II writes: “The Christian, thanks to God’s Revelation and to faith, is aware of the ‘newness’ which characterizes the morality of his actions: these actions are called to show either consistency or inconsistency with that dignity and vocation which have been bestowed on him by grace” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §73).

You must live your whole life according to the Christ you have received—Jesus the Lord; you must be rooted in him and built on him and held firm by the faith you have been taught, and full of thanksgiving. Make sure that no one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some second-hand, empty, rational philosophy based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ. (Col. 2:6–8; Old Jerusalem Bible)

Jesus Christ is the supreme norm of the Christian moral life. To use Hans Urs von Balthasar's words, Christ is both a "formal, universal norm of moral life, which can be applied to everyone" and also a "concrete and personal norm."⁴⁰ He is the "*exemplar* in whose image we are created and then recreated by grace and the *exemplum* whom we must imitate."⁴¹ Very early in the encyclical, John Paul II writes:

The decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself, as the Second Vatican Council recalls: "In fact, *it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man*. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of the future man, namely, of Christ the Lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love."⁴²

Moral reasoning and moral action, for the Christian, must occur within this intimate relationship with Christ, which always comes first. Hence Christian morality is essentially different from any secular moral code, while simultaneously not being contradictory to reason.⁴³

All of the Christian moral life, therefore, occurs within the context of

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," in *Principles of Christian Morality*, ed. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar Heinz Schürmann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1975), 79.

⁴¹ Michael J. Dodds, "The Teaching of Thomas Aquinas on the Mysteries of the Life of Christ," in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, ed. John Yocum, Thomas Weinandy, and Daniel A. Keating (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 108.

⁴² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §2.

⁴³ Leo XIII expressed this conclusion in similar terms, writing: "As to morals, the laws of the Gospel not only immeasurably surpass the wisdom of the heathen, but are an invitation and an introduction to a state of holiness unknown to the ancients; and, bringing man nearer to God, they make him at one the possessor of a more perfect liberty (*Libertas*, §12).

this relationship with Christ. John Paul II writes, emphasizing by the use of his trademark italics, “*Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.*”⁴⁴ The Christian “by his actions . . . shows his likeness or unlikeness to the image of the Son who is the first-born among many brethren (cf. Rom 8:29).” John Paul II continues, claiming that the Christian “lives out his fidelity or infidelity to the gift of the Spirit, and he opens or closes himself to eternal life, to the communion of vision, love and happiness with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁵ This life of following Christ, of which the Christian moral life consists, has some essential elements, which are listed by John Paul II in §28. These are:

1. the subordination of man and his activity to God, the one who “alone is good”;
2. the relationship between the moral good of human acts and eternal life;
3. Christian discipleship, which opens up before man the perspective of perfect love;
4. and the gift of the Holy Spirit, source and means of the moral life of the “new creation.”

Any attempt to formulate an adequate account of Christian moral theology must take these essential elements into consideration. Within the paradigm of this paper, these elements provide an approach which integrates faith and morality, avoiding both extremes of either positing a purely rational morality based on a natural law that refuses to acknowledge its dependence on the eternal law, or of maintaining that faith is on a transcendent level and one’s moral choices do not impact one’s relationship with God and eternal salvation.

In conclusion, in *Veritatis Splendor* John Paul II presents a priceless analysis of the state of moral theology in 1993 and clears the way for fruitful work in moral theology today. His identification of the ruptures between freedom and truth, and between faith and morals, provides an important paradigm for reading the recent history of moral theology, understanding contemporary problems within this field, and indicating a trajectory for the future. In this paper the second, and deeper, of the two ruptures has been analyzed. This has shed light on some contemporary problems in moral theology and indicated pathways toward some rich solutions proposed by John Paul II. In the final analysis, in the thought

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §19.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §73.

of John Paul II, emphasis must always be maintained on the importance of recognizing the synergy between faith and morals. The following quote from §71 of *Veritatis Splendor* offers a succinct summary of what it means to live as a Christian:

Following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means *becoming conformed to him* who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (cf. Phil 2:5–8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (cf. Eph 3:17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the *effect of grace*, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us.⁴⁶ N.V

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §21.