

Suggested Theses for the Instruction
on
SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS IN
MORAL THEOLOGY

by

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A. OBJECT OF MORAL THEOLOGY

1. The truth about the human person
as the basis for Christian morality

Thesis 1: God governs human persons by providing them with knowledge of moral truth, which enables them to govern themselves.

- (1) God--the source of all reality, meaning, and value--is the source of human persons' dignity.
 - (a) Human persons are superior to everything else in visible creation, because God creates them in his own image and likeness, and calls them to share supernaturally in the communion of the divine family.
 - (b) God endows human persons with intelligence and free choice, so that they can understand his plan and freely choose to live according to it.
 - (c) Thus, human persons receive their great dignity from God.
- (2) Insofar as they are intelligent and free, human persons are not governed as subhuman realities are by laws of nature which determine behavior.
 - (a) God wisely guides and lovingly helps everything toward its fulfillment.
 - (b) He governs subhuman things by laws of nature which determine their behavior.
 - (c) Precisely insofar as human persons shape their own lives by their free choices, human persons cannot be governed by laws of nature.

- (3) God enables human persons to know moral truths, so that they might govern themselves by them.
- (a) To some extent, the understanding which human persons have of God's plan for their fulfillment necessarily depends on his revelation.
 - (b) But to some extent the understanding which human persons of God's plan is natural to them.
 - i) St. Paul says that God writes the moral law on human hearts. He says this because human persons naturally know the principles of morality, and because God created human nature.
 - ii) Human persons' natural knowledge of God's plan begins from their spontaneous practical knowledge of the goods which can fulfill human persons as individuals and in community.
 - iii) The principles of the *natural moral law* are found in this spontaneous natural knowledge of human goods. These principles of natural law must be distinguished from the *laws of nature* which govern subhuman things.

Thesis 2: Moral norms are truths which guide free choices. But one can choose contrary to a moral norm. A choice contrary to a moral norm is morally evil.

- (1) Moral norms direct human actions toward human persons' true fulfillment.
 - (a) As explained above, God enables human persons to know moral truths so that human persons might direct their actions toward their proper fulfillment.
 - (b) Right actions are those which tend toward true human fulfillment and wrong actions are those which could tend toward it, but do not.
 - (c) When one reasons soundly from the principles of natural law in order to determine the rightness or wrongness of specific kinds of actions, one's reasoning concludes in moral norms.
 - (d) Therefore, moral norms are truths, not rules--that is, not positive laws.
- (2) The genesis of moral good and evil is in the conformity or nonconformity of free choices with moral truths.
 - (a) The efficient causes of moral goodness are God's grace and human freedom.
 - i) Endowed with the power of free choice and helped by God's grace, human persons always can freely choose in accord with moral truths.
 - ii) Choices in accord with moral truths are morally good.
 - (b) Moral evil originates entirely in created persons' free choices.
 - i) Because of their complex make up, human persons have desires which tend to objects of fragmented satisfaction at the expense of integral human fulfillment.

- ii) Choices to seek fragmented satisfactions at the expense of integral human fulfillment are contrary to moral truths, and so such choices are morally evil.
- iii) God gives the help of his grace to all who pray for it and accept it, so morally evil free choices are in no way God's fault.
- (c) From free choices, moral good and evil extend to whatever free choices cause insofar as they cause it. Therefore, moral good and evil are found in human acts, character, social structures, and so on.

Thesis 3: Moral good and evil cannot be reduced to other sorts of value and disvalue.

- (1) There are nonmoral values and disvalues: health and disease in the field of biological nature; soundness and unsoundness in the field of rational discourse; beauty and ugliness in the esthetic field; efficiency and inefficiency in the field of technique; and success and failure in satisfying particular desires or attaining particular goals.
- (2) Moral values differ in their genesis from nonmoral values.
 - (a) Moral values and disvalues arise from human free choices in virtue of their relationship to moral truths.
 - (b) Nonmoral values and disvalues can originate independently of any human free choice.
- (3) Therefore, moral value and disvalue are irreducible to nonmoral value and disvalue.

Thesis 4: Free choices are self-determining, and the self which they determine lasts after they are carried out. This effect of free choices on one's self is more important than their other effects.

- (1) Free choices constitute the moral self which lasts.
 - (a) One's free choices, once made, determine one's self unless and until one makes another, incompatible choice.
 - (b) Free choices made by two or more persons in communion determine their interpersonal relationship with one another.
 - (c) Among free choices are commitments.
 - i) Like other free choices, commitments are self-determining.
 - ii) But their object is more than a particular act, for a commitment concerns a more or less lasting interpersonal relationship. That relationship carries with it responsibilities to choose appropriate acts from time to time.
 - iii) Thus, commitments are free choices which organize one's life and determine one's self more extensively than most other choices.
 - (d) Therefore, by making free choices, and especially by making commitments and fulfilling them, persons and groups of persons build themselves up day by day, for good or evil.

- (2) The lasting effect of free choices on moral selves and interpersonal communions is more important than the effects of free choices on nonmoral values and disvalues, even those within human persons themselves, such as bodily health and disease.
- (a) Just as God will raise the dead to life, so he will re-create all the nonmoral values which he plans to include in his kingdom, and will complete what remains lacking at the end of time to the realization of these nonmoral values (GS 39).
 - (b) By contrast, although God will purge of moral defects those who die in his love, their moral selves and interpersonal communions, built up by God's grace and their virtuous free choices in this life, will remain forever in heaven, just as Jesus' sacrifice remains in him.
 - (c) Similarly, the selves of those who die in the state of mortal sin, which they have determined by their actual mortal sin in this life, will remain forever in hell.
 - i) Choices really are self-determining.
 - ii) A choice which is morally evil is contrary to a moral truth, and so is opposed to the human fulfillment toward which moral truths guide action.
 - iii) Mortal sin is committed only by a deliberate and free choice of some act which is gravely wrong.

2. The relevance of faith for moral action

Thesis 5: There are specifically Christian moral norms.

- (1) Specifically Christian moral norms do not presuppose specifically Christian moral principles.
 - (a) The principles of morality--natural law--are not specifically Christian; as St. Paul points out, they are written on every human heart.
 - (b) Nevertheless, these principles of morality, when applied to specific kinds of acts, yield specific moral norms. In this respect, the relationship between moral principles and moral norms is similar to that between the principles of a science and the specific theories which those principles yield when applied to data.
 - (c) Among the acts which constitute Christian life, some are specifically Christian in kind, as will be shown shortly.
 - (d) Therefore, although they are not themselves specifically Christian, the principles of morality yield specifically Christian moral norms.
- (2) Jesus' life embodies and his teaching proclaims a set of moral truths, including some which are specifically Christian. So, his human life is fully intelligible only in the light of the Gospel.
 - (a) The Gospel explains the actual human condition.

- i) From God's creation of the first humans, he called them to share supernaturally in the communion of the divine family.
 - ii) If the first humans had obeyed God, they and all humankind would have formed his family on earth. However, they sinned with the bad results that humankind as such is not in friendship with God, human nature is damaged, and human persons are at odds with themselves and one another.
 - iii) Nevertheless, human nature was not corrupted by sin. So the goods which fulfill human persons remain what they originally were, and the principles of natural law, which direct choices toward those goods, remain true.
 - iv) However, left to themselves, fallen human persons cannot live morally good lives, because of their damaged nature.
- (b) Despite human sin, God remains faithful to his plan for human persons. He redeems them by means of Jesus' human actions, not exclusively by divine actions.
- i) God sent his son, Jesus Christ, who is truly divine but also truly human.
 - ii) In respect to his humanity, Jesus is like fallen men and women in all things save sin.
 - iii) Entering into the situation of fallen humankind, Jesus confronted sin and all its consequences with healing love. He announced a permanent communion of friendship between humankind and God (the new covenant).
 - iv) In completing his mission, Jesus laid down his life for his human brothers and sisters, and offered this sacrifice to his Father.
 - v) God accepted the sacrifice and sealed the new covenant by raising Jesus from death to life and heavenly glory.
- (c) Jesus' life embodies moral norms.
- i) His human life is morally perfect, not only in his commitment to do the Father's will and in his love of his human brothers and sisters, but in every specific act which he chooses to do.
 - ii) Moral goodness is in the conformity of free choices with moral truths.
 - iii) Moral truths specified to definite kinds of acts are moral norms.
 - iv) Therefore, all the acts of Jesus' human life embody moral norms.
- (d) Some of the moral norms which Jesus' life embodies are peculiar to himself.
- i) Jesus' act of self-sacrifice is part of the means by which God establishes the new covenant community. He completes its establishment when he raises Jesus from the dead and sends the Holy Spirit.
 - ii) Only Jesus could make this acceptable sacrifice.
 - iii) Therefore, the norms embodied in this unique act are peculiar to Jesus.

- (e) The principles of natural law together with the truth God reveals about the human condition--fallen but redeemed and called to glory--ground the Beatitudes, which Jesus proclaimed.
- i) The Beatitudes are general moral truths, intermediate between the principles of natural law and specific Christian moral norms. Thus, the Beatitudes themselves articulate the grounds of the specific moral norms which shaped Jesus' redemptive act.
 - ii) In proclaiming and fulfilling the Beatitudes, Jesus not only revealed how one can live uprightly in the world as it actually is but provided the model for all his followers.
 - iii) Thus, the Beatitudes can yield the specific Christian moral norms which Jesus' followers need to shape their lives in accord with their faith in him.
- (f) The Beatitudes mark out the way of Jesus to be followed by each Christian in every act of his or her life.
- i) The Beatitude concerning the poor in spirit calls for humility like Jesus' and Mary's; it calls those who believe in Jesus to recognize their total dependence on the grace God gives in him, and to seek and accept that grace with childlike humility and gratitude.
 - ii) The Beatitude concerning the sorrowing calls for a detachment like Jesus'; it calls Christians to give up whatever they must--not only pleasure, power, and possessions, but, when necessary, even life itself and other important human goods--to follow Jesus.
 - iii) The Beatitude concerning the meek calls for meekness like that of Jesus, who emptied himself and endured everything necessary to fulfill the Father's will; it calls Christians to accept their personal vocation and to resign themselves to God's providence as they follow Jesus.
 - iv) The Beatitude concerning those who hunger and thirst calls for an eagerness like Jesus' for God's kingdom and righteousness; it calls Christians to shape their lives entirely by Christian hope.
 - v) The Beatitude concerning the merciful calls for mercy like that which God shows humankind in Jesus; it calls Christians to be merciful as the Father has been merciful to them.
 - vi) The Beatitude concerning the single-hearted calls for authenticity like Jesus'; it calls Christians to strive always to eliminate sin entirely from their lives, so that their hearts will be devoted more and more completely to God's kingdom.
 - vii) The Beatitude concerning the peacemakers calls for peacemaking like Jesus'; it calls Christians to make peace with others and to work for everyone's salvation, as God reconciles humankind to himself in Jesus.
 - viii) The Beatitude concerning those who suffer persecution for justice' sake and for Jesus' sake calls for self-oblation like his; it calls

Christians to embrace the suffering they must endure as they follow Jesus along the way of their own cross.

Thesis 6: By the act of faith, Christians commit themselves to live according to specifically Christian moral norms.

- (1) By the act of faith, Christians enter into Jesus' new covenant communion.
 - (a) Jesus commissioned the apostles and his Church founded on them to preach his Gospel to all nations until the end of time.
 - (b) People ready to repent and accept the Gospel seek faith in baptism.
 - (c) The fundamental Christian choice is to make the act of faith, from which hope follows. When the gifts of faith and hope are received in baptism, God's love also is poured into one's heart.
 - (d) By baptism, one becomes a member of the Church, which is Jesus' new covenant communion of humankind with God.
- (2) The commitment of faith is a commitment to cooperate with Jesus' redemptive work.
 - (a) A covenant is an alliance, a community formed by mutual commitments to work together for a common purpose. Thus, in making the act of faith one allies oneself with Jesus--that is, one undertakes to cooperate with him.
 - (b) One lives out one's share in Jesus' sacrifice by living one's life according to one's faith.
 - i) Faith and baptism admit one to the Eucharist, in which Jesus makes himself and his sacrifice present, so that one can share in it.
 - ii) With the light and power of the Holy Spirit, one can make choices in accord with one's faith, and so live a holy life.
 - (c) One's life according to faith carries on Jesus' mission by bearing witness to him.
- (3) Personal vocation links faith with the particular acts which make up one's Christian life.
 - (a) As explained above, the fundamental Christian choice is to make the act of faith.
 - (b) Next are the several principal commitments which constitute one's personal vocation--the commitment to a certain state of life, the commitment to a certain line of work, and so forth. These commitments not only should be shaped by faith and hope, but also should be made out of love of God and neighbor.
 - (c) One's personal vocation, in turn, determines most of one's affirmative responsibilities.
 - (d) Mary shows every Christian how to follow Jesus.
 - i) By her *fiat*, Mary committed herself to her personal vocation and she followed Jesus by faithfully fulfilling it; she remains Jesus' mother in heaven and continues to fulfill her motherly role toward us.

- ii) Similarly, we must find our personal vocations, commit ourselves to them, and follow Jesus by faithfully fulfilling them.
- iii) If we do, we form personal friendships with Jesus and with other persons, and these friendships, begun in this life, will continue forever in heaven.

Thesis 7: Christian moral life is the way in which Christians, moved by God's grace, put into practice their faith, hope, and love. Christian moral life is not merely the symbolic or expressive "incarnation" of faith, hope, and love.

- (1) Salvation primarily depends on God's grace, but a morally good life also is an essential part of Christians' way of salvation.
 - (a) God's goodness is so great that he wills his gifts also to be Christians' merits, and so saintly lives merit salvation.
 - (b) God is glorified by the fulfillment of human persons, and, because he loves them as his adopted children, he wants them to be fulfilled. But for human persons to do what is morally evil is to block or fall short of their own fulfillment.
 - (c) Since without grace moral perfection is impossible for fallen men and women, Christians' holy lives bear witness to their hope and manifest the Holy Spirit's power at work in them. Thus, Christians' lives make an irreplaceable contribution to the Church's mission of evangelization.
 - (d) The goods of persons and communions of persons realized in and through their morally good acts are materials of the heavenly kingdom, destined to last forever.
- (2) To satisfy all the reasons why a morally good life is an essential part of the way of salvation, Christians must live by specifically Christian moral truths.
 - (a) People who are ignorant of relevant moral truths can merit if they do what they can with the help of God's grace.
 - (b) But people cannot be fulfilled as God wills except by living according to moral truth.
 - (c) Moreover, if Christians fail to make their choices according to Christian moral standards, their lives neither will be fully upright nor will they differ markedly from the lives of nonbelievers. So their lives will not bear witness to their Christian faith and hope.
 - (d) Besides, Christians will not supply materials for the kingdom which God plans unless they act according to his plan, as he has made it known to them both by the natural moral law and by Jesus' life and teaching.

Thesis 8: There is no fundamental option involving the exercise of a freedom distinct from free choice. God's grace and free choice account for the true fundamental option of Christian life: the three theological virtues together.

- (1) Some today disengage faith, hope, and charity from the daily acts of Christian life.
 - (a) They posit a mysterious freedom, distinct from the capacity to make free choices, as the capacity to make a "fundamental option." (This mysterious freedom sometimes is called "basic," "transcendental," "fundamental," or "core" freedom.)
 - i) They claim that a fundamental option toward God is necessary as the basis or organizing principle for all the conscious morally good choices which Christians make.
 - ii) Their main theological argument for positing such freedom is that the Council of Trent teaches that one cannot know with the certitude of faith that one is in grace.
 - (b) They suggest that a Christian can freely choose with sufficient reflection to do an act whose matter is grave without committing a mortal sin, provided that the act does not reverse his or her "fundamental option."
 - i) They claim that this mysterious freedom is inaccessible to consciousness and distinct from the capacity for free choice.
 - ii) They think that by positing this freedom they can reconcile two things which they believe often coexist in Christians' lives: basic faithfulness to Christ and rather frequent lapses into sins traditionally considered mortal.
- (2) It is an error to try to disengage faith from the particular acts which make up a Christian's life.
 - (a) The explanation given above of how personal vocation mediates between faith and daily life makes clear the dynamic relationship between the fundamental Christian choice to make the act of faith (the fundamental option at the "transcendental" level) and the specific moral content of a holy life (good free choices at the "categorical" level).
 - (b) The hypothesis of another sort of freedom plainly is unnecessary to explain the basis and organizing principle of Christian life, for the free choice to make the act of faith--preceded, accompanied, and followed by God's grace--can account for the true fundamental option of Christian life, which in its fullness consists of the three theological virtues together.
 - (c) The Council of Trent denies, not that one can have *any* sort of certitude, but that one can have the *certitude of faith* that one is in grace. Trent rejected Luther's heresy, but not the theory (held at that time by some Catholic theologians) that one can be certain that one is in grace.

- (d) Moreover, Trent's teaching on the sacrament of penance assumes that one can know when one is *not* in grace, namely, when one deliberately chooses to sin in a matter which one knows is grave.
- (e) One can commit a mortal sin without entirely reversing one's fundamental option.
 - i) One can commit a mortal sin without losing one's faith or the hope which flows from it. Dead faith and hope are not a Christian's fundamental option in its fullness, but they are a real part of it.
 - ii) Therefore, one can commit a mortal sin without entirely reversing one's fundamental option.
 - iii) But one cannot commit a mortal sin without separating oneself from God's love, and thereby rendering one's faith dead and one's whole life empty of ultimate value.
- (f) The hypothesis of a mysterious freedom, invoked to reconcile basic faithfulness to Christ with rather frequent lapses into sins traditionally considered mortal, is gratuitous and at odds with the Catholic practice of the sacrament of penance.
 - i) Those who appear to sin in grave matter with sufficient reflection and free choice may sometimes lack sufficient reflection or free choice or both.
 - ii) For those in the state of mortal sin, the acts of faith and hope, even without charity, constitute a certain bond of human friendship with Christ.
 - iii) Frequent lapses into sins traditionally considered mortal might well really be mortal sins.
 - iv) If an essential condition for a truly mortal sin is inaccessible to consciousness, one cannot examine one's conscience and confess one's mortal sins as Catholics are required to do by Trent's definitive teaching on the sacrament of penance.

B. The Method and Sources of Moral Theology

3. Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium in moral theology

Thesis 9: What is true in general about the relationship of Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium to theology also is true about their relationship to moral theology.

- (1) Christian moral norms are intrinsic to faith; they are the practical truths which are part of faith.
 - (a) Faith is not simply assent to a body of truths, but the principle of life in Jesus' new covenant communion.
 - (b) One who enters into a covenant accepts the responsibility to fulfill its terms--in this case, to fulfill one's baptismal commitment by following Jesus.
 - (c) Therefore, the way of Jesus is not some sort of appendix to dogma--something added to faith from without--but the true practical implication of entering into the new covenant.
- (2) In seeking evidences of the Church's moral teaching in tradition, theologians should not limit themselves to the examination of doctrinal documents.
 - (a) They ought also to consider other elements of tradition which are especially relevant to morality.
 - (b) Among these are the Church's universal and constant penitential practice, the moral presuppositions of universal Church law, the moral standards used in judging saints worthy of canonization, and the moral themes of liturgical prayers.

Thesis 10: God's revelation in Jesus--the Christian Gospel--is the one source of all saving truth and all moral teaching.

- (1) Divine revelation is necessary for Christian life for two reasons: (1) because God calls human persons to a supernatural end, and (2) because moral truth often is obscure to fallen men and women.
 - (a) Divine revelation is absolutely necessary because God calls human persons to share supernaturally in the communion of the divine family.
 - i) According to God's plan and will, Jesus as man is our way, not only in this life but forever, to communion with the divine family .
 - ii) As has been shown, we cannot follow Jesus unless we understand his life in the light of faith, hear the call of the Beatitudes, and respond to that call.

- (b) Revelation also includes truths in themselves accessible to human reason.
 - i) Among these truths accessible to human reason are many moral truths which, in humankind's fallen condition, seem obscure and uncertain to men and women who lack faith.
 - ii) Because these truths are revealed, however, everyone who has faith can know them with firm certitude and without a mixture of errors.
- (2) Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium are parts of a unified whole, not three entirely separate sources for theology. Thus, Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium are distinct but closely interrelated.
 - (a) The role of tradition:
 - i) The apostles received the Gospel with faith, and on Pentecost they began the process of handing it on. We call this process "tradition."
 - ii) The Gospel continuously exists in the faith and life of the Church founded on the apostles, as she hands on all that she is and believes, down through the centuries.
 - (b) The role of Scripture:
 - i) Scripture is an irreplaceable, divinely inspired expression of that same faith.
 - ii) Therefore, Scripture is a privileged element of tradition.
 - iii) However, for that very reason Scripture can be understood correctly only when it is read in the light of the Church's living faith.
 - (c) The role of the magisterium:
 - i) The magisterium is the teaching function of the Church's pastoral leaders.
 - ii) They are the apostles' successors, authorized to teach in Jesus' person and assisted by the Holy Spirit in carrying out their mission.
 - iii) The magisterium bears witness to the faith which the apostles received, authoritatively interprets its scriptural and other expressions, guards it as inviolable, and expounds it with fidelity.
- (3) All individual believers, including theologians and bishops, receive their personal faith by sharing in the Church's faith.
 - (a) Each believer has access to God's revelation in Jesus by reading Scripture and listening to the Church's preaching and teaching of the Gospel received from the apostles.
 - (b) To hear God's word, each believer must listen to, study, and meditate on it, understanding it as it is understood within the Church.
 - (c) The faith of each believer begins in baptism and is nourished when he or she participates with the proper dispositions in the Eucharist and other elements of the Church's liturgy.

Thesis 11: The magisterium infallibly proposes some specific moral norms.

Catholics are to accept these infallibly proposed norms with the assent of faith.

- (1) The magisterium seldom dogmatically defines specific moral norms.
- (2) The magisterium constantly and most firmly teaches many specific moral norms contained in Scripture.
 - (a) Some moral norms are asserted in Scripture.
 - i) Among these are the commandments of the Decalog, which hold a unique place in the Mosaic law.
 - ii) Jesus reaffirmed and perfected the commandments; the law of love does not nullify the commandments but requires and empowers their fulfillment and more than their fulfillment.
 - iii) The sacred writers assert many specific norms not explicit in the Decalog--for example, Jesus' teaching concerning divorce and remarriage.
 - (b) The moral norms which the sacred writers assert are revealed moral truths.
 - i) Whatever the writers of the books of Scripture assert is asserted by the Holy Spirit.
 - ii) Therefore, the moral norms asserted in Scripture cannot be in error.
 - (c) The magisterium has taught many moral norms asserted in Scripture as essential for salvation.
 - i) These are norms whose violation excludes one from sharing in the kingdom.
 - ii) Among these are scriptural norms forbidding adultery and other forms of extramarital sexual behavior.
- (3) The magisterium constantly and most firmly teaches certain other moral norms nowhere explicitly asserted in Scripture.
 - (a) These norms are contained in tradition and are in accord with the sum total of revealed doctrine contained in biblical sources.
 - (b) These norms, too, clearly belong to the moral order revealed by God.
 - (c) The norm excluding contraception is an example of this type of norm.
- (4) By her universal, ordinary magisterium, the Church proposes norms of both sorts definitively.
 - (a) She proposes those explicitly contained in Scripture as truths divinely revealed.
 - (b) She proposes other norms which clearly pertain to divine revelation as truths either implicitly revealed or closely and necessarily connected with revelation.

4. Philosophy, experience, and the human sciences in moral theology

Thesis 12: Sound philosophy can play an important role in theology, but not all philosophy is sound.

- (1) Sound philosophy can play a role in theology.
 - (a) Sound philosophy is compatible with faith.
 - i) The truth which faith teaches is compatible with any truth human persons can know by reason.
 - ii) Sound philosophy seeks truth by reason.
 - (b) Sound philosophy helps moral theology in two ways.
 - i) It helps to explain and defend Christian morality, especially in respect to truths in themselves accessible to human reason.
 - ii) It manifests the rational indefensibility of many ideologies and moral opinions incompatible with the moral truths which faith teaches.
- (2) Not all philosophy is sound.
 - (a) Ancient and modern philosophers differ in their relationships to the Gospel.
 - i) Among peoples who had not yet heard the Gospel, some philosophers, as it were, reached out toward it. Their thought still can prepare people to hear the Gospel, and it is often useful as an instrument in Christian theological reflection.
 - ii) Among peoples who already have heard the Gospel, some philosophers accept it, while others reject it.
 - (b) Some modern and contemporary philosophies actually are ideologies of nonbelief.
 - i) Some modern and contemporary philosophers reject divine revelation and deliberately try to replace Christian faith and the following of Jesus with an alternative world view and way of life.
 - ii) Their philosophies cannot serve as neutral instruments in Catholic theology.
- (3) Some moral theologians have drawn uncritically on various nineteenth and twentieth century philosophies.
 - (a) Many moral theologians, especially those living in wealthy nations, have developed consequentialist or proportionalist methodologies influenced by utilitarianism.
 - (b) Elements of Kant's framework, including the distinction between the transcendental and the categorical, gained currency among Catholic theologians. These Kantian elements have been used to introduce false theories of fundamental option and to historicize the whole specific content of the Church's moral teaching.
 - (c) Some liberation theologians have borrowed not only Marx's social analysis but elements of his ideology.

- (d) Some moral theologians have accepted relativistic assumptions from one or another of the philosophies which reacted against Hegel's false rationalism.

Thesis 13: Experience, psychology, and other studies concerned with human acts can contribute to moral theology. But, before accepting what these sources offer, moral theologians should examine it critically.

- (1) Experience, psychology, and other disciplines concerned with human action can assist moral theology in at least four ways.
- (a) They can clarify the limits of the effective use of human freedom and can suggest some ways in which certain of these limits can be overcome.
 - (b) They can clarify the obstacles to the communication of the Gospel and point out factors which facilitate its communication.
 - (c) They can clarify the occasions of sin and identify the factors which favor virtuous living.
 - (d) They can clarify what people are doing when they make certain kinds of choices.
 - i) Experience and the human sciences sometimes are necessary to understand objects of choices which include or depend upon complex political, social, economic, technological, or cultural realities.
 - ii) Experience, psychology, and the other human sciences often assist prudent deliberation by calling attention to consequences and possible alternatives which otherwise would be overlooked.
- (2) Moral theology must be critical in regard to what it accepts from experience, psychology, and other studies.
- (a) The deliverances of experience usually are more or less contaminated by beliefs and attitudes incompatible with Christian faith.
 - i) No experience is without a framework of interpretation.
 - ii) One's culture provides the framework within which one's experiences are formed.
 - iii) Every culture includes beliefs and attitudes incompatible with Christian faith.
 - iv) Even very saintly Christians only gradually conform their whole minds and their whole hearts to their faith.
 - (b) Very many contemporary psychologists and others who study human actions deny (or, at least, systematically ignore) one or both of two important truths, which can be known to reason but which also pertain to faith.
 - i) Human persons can make free choices. However, they think that human choices are entirely determined by prior factors.
 - ii) There are principles of morality (natural law) which are objectively true. However, they think that human individual and/or social action somehow establishes even the most basic moral principles.

- (c) While the theories and conclusions about human action proposed by those who deny either or both of these two truths may nonetheless contain valuable elements, these elements must be critically disengaged from their setting in a false anthropology.

Thesis 14: It is inconsistent with the Catholic conception of revelation and faith to use the experience of contemporary Catholics to challenge the Church's constant and most firm moral teaching.

- (1) The data of experience and science by themselves cannot falsify any moral norm.
 - (a) Nothing given in experience and nothing any science really knows about human persons, social realities, or the human condition can call into question any moral norm.
 - i) *What empirically is* cannot finally determine *what ought to be*.
 - ii) Science knows and one experiences only *what empirically is*, while moral norms tell *what ought to be*.
 - (b) Therefore, there is a fallacy in any argument which tries to show that the data of experience or the findings of contemporary science now call into question a traditional moral norm.
 - i) Critical examination will show that such an argument depends on at least one normative assumption--neither given in experience nor scientifically established--at odds with Christian faith.
 - ii) For example, some people claim that their experience shows that contraception serves their marital love, and others claim that science shows that homosexual behavior is as good for those disposed to it as marital love is for those disposed to behave heterosexually. However, examination will show that both claims rest on a conception of marital love which disagrees essentially with faith's teaching concerning marriage and marital love.
- (2) Those who try to use the experience of some contemporary Christians against the Church's constant and most firm moral teaching rely not only on empirical data but on a particular interpretation of the data. They try to validate their interpretation of the data by invoking what they sometimes call the "sensus fidelium" or "the faith of the Church" against the magisterium's teaching.
 - (a) They correctly point out that the Holy Spirit not only assists the magisterium but inwardly instructs the hearts of all the faithful.
 - (b) They accurately note that many Catholics and other Christians today dissent from some or all of the Church's moral teaching concerning sex, marriage, and innocent life.
 - (c) They assume that the Holy Spirit inspires that dissent by providing those who engage in it with a framework for interpretation such that

their experience assures them of the moral falsity of the received teaching.

- (d) They conclude that the experience of such Christians constitutes a legitimate theological source.
 - (e) Using this source as a criterion, they set aside as no longer binding the moral norms which the magisterium reaffirms (sometimes called "current official Church teaching").
- (3) The appeal to the "sensus fidelium" or "the faith of the Church" against the magisterium's teaching rests on assumptions inconsistent with the Catholic conception of revelation and faith.
- (a) Those who offer this argument treat the experience of some contemporary Christians not only as a theological source but as a completely autonomous theological source.
 - i) They contradict the moral magisterium.
 - ii) They dismiss as insignificant the experience of many other Christians, both of the past and of the present, who accepted or today accept the Church's teaching.
 - iii) They ignore or attempt to refute the tradition from which the magisterium receives the teaching, and the scriptural witnesses to many elements of that tradition.
 - (b) In using the experience of some contemporary Christians as an autonomous theological source, they implicitly presuppose what would be necessary to make it so--that this source mediates a fresh divine revelation.
 - i) In using the experience of some contemporary Christians as an autonomous theological source, they claim that they are merely interpreting and developing the tradition.
 - ii) However, they explicitly hold that the Church's teaching which is based on Scripture and tradition must be corrected to conform to the autonomous theological source which they invoke.
 - iii) But nothing in the revelation mediated by Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium contradicts the magisterium's teaching based on Scripture and tradition.
 - iv) Nothing can be a theological source except insofar as it mediates divine revelation.
 - v) Therefore, the deliverances of the experience of some contemporary Christians can serve as an autonomous theological source by which to criticize the moral norms which the magisterium reaffirms only if that theological source mediates a fresh revelation.
 - (c) This presupposition contradicts the Catholic conception of revelation and faith.
 - i) The Catholic conception of revelation and faith excludes any fresh public divine revelation after God's revelation in Jesus.
 - ii) The Catholic conception of revelation and faith excludes the mediation of revelation by religious experience apart from and at

odds with what the Church receives from Scripture and tradition, and proclaims through the living magisterium.

- (4) Those who pit Christian experience against the magisterium fail to distinguish between Christian experience and the experiences of Christians.
 - (a) The former is experience informed by faith, hope, and charity--the experience of spiritual persons who have put on the mind of Christ and who embody the norms of Christian moral teaching.
 - (b) The experiences of Christians include Christian experience but also include experience informed by personal sins and rationalizations, and formed by cultures which, to a great extent, either have abandoned or have not yet been imbued with the spirit of the Gospel.

6. The competence of the magisterium regarding the natural moral law

Thesis 15: In teaching on moral questions, the magisterium is bound by the Gospel and by the objectivity of moral truth.

- (1) The magisterium's teaching is not its own opinion.
 - (a) In morals as in dogma, the magisterium proclaims, defends, and explains the truth which the Church has received from Jesus.
 - (b) In doing so, the magisterium is always aware, as Jesus himself was, that this teaching is a sacred trust, which must be served faithfully.
- (2) In teaching on moral questions, the magisterium is limited by the very nature of moral truth.
 - (a) Because moral norms are truths to be known, not rules or positive laws to be made, revised, maintained, or set aside, nobody can determine by choice what will be morally permissible and what will be morally forbidden.
 - (b) Thus, the magisterium's competence does not extend to morally permitting or forbidding anything. In other words, the magisterium cannot bring it about that some kind of moral act becomes morally licit or illicit.
 - i) The magisterium does not impose the moral law on anyone.
 - ii) The magisterium does not ban or proscribe anything.
 - (c) In teaching the moral truth about some kinds of actions which are wrong, the magisterium only makes clear the true significance of choosing acts of those kinds.

Thesis 16: The magisterium draws on both Scripture and tradition, which include the principles of the natural moral law.

- (1) The magisterium draws on Scripture.
 - (a) The Bible does not contain a complete moral code.
 - (b) However, the Bible does contain a complete set of moral principles. For Jesus not only fully reveals the Father to humankind but also fully reveals what human persons are called to be and how they can fulfill their calling.
 - i) Jesus did not set aside but presupposed, refined, and developed previous revelation, which contains a very extensive body of moral truths.
 - ii) Moreover, in proclaiming, explaining, and fulfilling the Beatitudes, Jesus taught and exemplified all the virtues necessary for Christian life. The Beatitudes and Christian virtues include the principles of the natural law, which they specify.
- (2) The magisterium draws on tradition.
 - (a) There is a substantial Christian moral tradition, which includes specific moral norms handed on constantly and most firmly by the Church. These moral truths are part of the tradition of faith.
 - i) These norms are in accord with the sum total of revealed doctrine contained in biblical sources.
 - ii) They have been reaffirmed in diverse times and places under different conditions, they have been defended with diverse arguments.
 - iii) These truths have been accepted and proposed not as optional guidelines but as essential conditions for salvation.
 - (b) Even if it were true that this tradition does not contain every principle necessary to solve every new moral issue, it plainly does contain all the specific norms from which some dissent today despite their reaffirmation by the magisterium.
 - (c) Arguments that this tradition is no longer relevant to the contemporary world are unsound.
 - i) Many arguments along these lines presuppose consequentialism or proportionalism. See the section on moral absolutes, below.
 - ii) Others presuppose historicism. See the section on the immutability of the norms of the natural moral law, below.

Thesis 17: The magisterium's competence regarding the natural moral law extends to specific moral norms. The magisterium has the normative resources needed to develop any moral guidance any Catholic might need about any matter whatsoever.

- (1) The magisterium does not always have at hand the solution to new and difficult moral questions. But this fact does not show that the magisterium's competence regarding the natural moral law is limited.
 - (a) To solve a moral question, it is not sufficient to know all the relevant moral principles. It also is necessary to understand with precision the act which is to be morally evaluated.
 - (b) The magisterium cannot by itself understand every kind of act. If a moral question concerns actions whose very meaning depends upon complex political, social, economic, technological, or cultural realities, the magisterium must rely upon those expert in the matter to clarify precisely what the action is.
 - (c) Therefore, the magisterium's limitation in supplying moral solutions does not show that the magisterium lacks competence with respect to any part of the natural moral law.
- (2) The moral truths about acts of every kind which a Christian might choose somehow pertain to the Gospel.
 - (a) The Gospel is the source of all saving truth and all moral teaching.
 - (b) The Gospel calls every Christian to holiness.
 - (c) Any immorality whatsoever impairs holiness.
- (3) The magisterium's competence in morals as well as in faith extends beyond what is explicitly revealed.
 - (a) Not every moral truth about acts of a kind which Christians might choose belongs explicitly to the revealed deposit itself.
 - (b) However, the magisterium's competence extends both to what is only implicit in the revealed deposit and to what is closely connected with the revealed deposit itself, although not even implicit in it.
 - (c) The magisterium's competence extends to everything required to guard the revealed deposit as inviolable and to expound it with fidelity.
- (4) The teaching of a particular moral truth can become necessary in either of two cases.
 - (a) That moral truth's contradictory is erroneously accepted by some of the faithful as a norm consistent with following Jesus. In making this error, these faithful begin to misunderstand the full meaning of the Gospel for their lives. And so the explicit teaching of that moral truth is necessary to guard the revealed deposit as inviolable.
 - (b) Ignorance of that moral truth on the part of some of the faithful impedes their progress toward holiness, and so its explicit teaching is necessary to expound the revealed deposit with fidelity.

C. Particular Themes

6. Absolute moral norms

Thesis 18: In teaching specific, absolute moral norms, the Church neither absolutizes nor disregards any finite human good.

- (1) In teaching moral absolutes, the Church does not absolutize finite goods.
 - (a) Some today argue that to hold that there are specific, absolute moral norms is to absolutize finite goods. For example, innocent human life is only a limited good, and many people today think that human lives should be destroyed when necessary to promote other goods, such as a better quality of life or political liberation.
 - (b) The answer to this argument is that specific, absolute moral norms do not absolutize finite goods; rather, these norms protect persons. Thus, for example, whenever a human life is destroyed in the name of serving some ulterior human good, some person is used as a mere means, treated as a disposable thing.
- (2) In teaching moral absolutes, the Church does not disregard any human good. While specific, absolute moral norms are expressed negatively, they have a positive function.
 - (a) Some consider moral absolutes to be merely negative limits on people's efforts to do the best they can in difficult situations. They argue that the Church disregards those human goods which can be achieved or protected only by violating moral absolutes.
 - (b) The Church does not disregard the goods which could be served by violating moral absolutes. She trusts divine providence with respect to what human action cannot do without violating moral truths.
 - (c) Absolute norms safeguard realities essential to good human lives and authentic human interpersonal communions. For example, marital unfaithfulness radically betrays marital love and undermines family life; contraception attacks human life *in fieri* and radically abuses the language of the human body.
 - (d) The values which such norms protect are very important. They are intrinsic to human persons.
 - (e) Moreover, many of these values are designed and used by God in his self-revelation to express his own trinitarian life, life-giving love, and will to establish and forever maintain covenant communion with humankind.
 - (f) The benefits anticipated by those who try to justify the violation of moral absolutes seldom are realized.

- i) For example, the mass killing of the innocent in the twentieth century has not built the promised world of freedom, justice, and peace.
- ii) Similarly, those who advocated the social acceptance of divorce, contraception, abortion, and a relaxed sexual morality promised great personal and social benefits. But the widespread setting aside of moral norms regarding sexual behavior and marriage has not made people's intimate relationships more meaningful and more fulfilling, provided better care and education of children, or lessened society's burden of caring for the abandoned and dependent.

Thesis 19: Some specific moral norms are nonabsolute but not all specific moral norms are similar to those which are nonabsolute.

- (1) There are various sorts of absolute and nonabsolute moral norms.
 - (a) Everyone agrees that there are absolute norms such as "Love your neighbor," "Obey God," "Always be chaste," and "Do no murder."
 - (b) But the Church's whole tradition makes it clear that there also are specific, absolute moral norms (sometimes called "operative norms of behavior"), such as "It is always wrong to commit adultery" and "It is always wrong to practice contraception."
 - i) These specific, absolute moral norms exclude acts of certain kinds universally (always and everywhere), regardless of the circumstances in which and the intentions with which acts of those kinds might be chosen.
 - ii) Thus, choices of acts of such kinds cannot be justified even in unusual situations or by ulterior good ends.
 - (c) Not all specific moral norms are absolute. For example, promises are to be kept, but sometimes one is justified in breaking a promise.
- (2) The fact that some moral norms are nonabsolute does not show that no specific moral norm is absolute. The difference between the two sorts of norms can be explained.
 - (a) Absolute and nonabsolute norms differ in their relationships to moral principles.
 - i) Absolute moral norms express the unconditional requirements which basic moral principles have for certain kinds of actions. For example, the basic moral principles of the inherent dignity of persons and the sacredness of human life directly imply the wrongness of killing the innocent.
 - ii) Nonabsolute norms express only in a provisional way the implications of more basic truths. For example, the Golden Rule underlies the norm concerning promise keeping. In general, we depend on others to keep their promises and are disappointed and

often seriously harmed when others their break promises.

Therefore, we wish to count on others to keep their promises and so fairness requires that we make a practice of keeping ours.

However, one is justified in breaking a promise if, but only if, one's doing so is consistent with the Golden Rule.

- (3) Some think that only the ultimate judgment of prudence or conscience is absolute, and that this judgment never can be reduced completely to universal moral truths. On their view, all universal moral truths, including all specific moral norms, are only guidelines, applicable for the most part but open to exceptions in particular cases.
 - (a) A philosophical argument for this view: Human choices are of particulars. As one moves from the universal of the specific norm to the particular of prudent judgment, the many conditions of the particular can make it inappropriate to fulfill the requirement of the specific norm. So, in exceptional cases prudent judgment does not follow the specific norm, which therefore is nonabsolute.
 - (b) A theological argument for this view: Because human nature is fallen, situations of absolute perplexity arise, in which moral ideals must be compromised in order to act in the best way possible.
- (4) The philosophical and theological arguments for this view fail.
 - (a) The determinants by which any immoral act is evil, no matter how complex they may be, always are intelligible features which would determine in the same way any other act which had the same features. Thus, an act of a kind whose definition includes a determinant which makes it immoral cannot be chosen in any particular instance without choosing to do what is morally evil.
 - i) Choices are acts of the will specified by an intellectual judgment. Therefore, their determinants are intelligible.
 - ii) Examples proposed to show that moral absolutes must yield to the demands of the "unique" situation always appeal to features of the situation which, no matter how complex they may be, are intelligible and in principle repeatable ad infinitum.
 - (b) The fallen human condition neither requires nor justifies any choice contrary to any absolute specific norm.
 - i) The principles of natural moral law do not presuppose an ideal human situation; they presuppose human nature. Although human nature is not now realized in an ideal situation, it is not corrupted by sin.
 - ii) Human nature is not only fallen but redeemed. God's grace is sufficient and always available to anyone who sincerely prays for it and cooperates with it.
 - iii) One who is in the state of grace through faith in Jesus never encounters a situation in which moral compromise is unavoidable. To deny this is to deny Catholic teaching defined by the Council of Trent.

- iv) Thus, the specific, absolute moral norms which until yesterday all segments of the Judeo-Christian tradition handed on--for example, those excluding adultery and contraception--are not to be regarded today as moral ideals which could be subject to compromise in difficult situations.
 - v) Specifically Christian moral norms are not norms for living in some ideal world. Rather, they direct one to act in ways entirely suited to the fallen human condition. No such Christian way of acting is inconsistent with any moral absolute.
- (5) Nevertheless, the view that moral truths are only guidelines is partly correct. Any affirmative norm, such as "Promises are to be kept," can be inadequate to guide prudent judgment in some cases. But the same thing is not true with respect to negative absolutes, such as "Contraception is always wrong."
- (a) Affirmative norms cannot be absolute, because the goodness of the element of the act specified by the affirmative norm cannot by itself make the whole act good.
 - i) Any defect in a moral act will make it morally wrong (*malum ex quocumque defectu*).
 - ii) No universal norm can specify every possible element of an act.
 - iii) Unspecified elements of the act--circumstances and/or ulterior motives--can render doing an act of that kind inappropriate.
 - (b) But negative norms can be absolute, so that acts contrary to them remain wrong even if certain conditions or legitimate purposes seem to call for such acts.
 - i) A universal norm can specify the precise object of an act, which is one important element in it.
 - ii) Any defect in a moral act will make it morally wrong. If the act is wrong *ex obiecto*, the other elements of the act cannot make it good (*bonum ex integra causa*).

Thesis 20: Today, many who reject moral absolutes offer a theory called "consequentialism" or "proportionalism." Such theories focus on the prospective consequences of choices and appeal to allegedly offsetting proportionate reasons to justify the admitted (supposedly only nonmoral) evil which they allow. All such theories fail. *In what follows, all theories of this sort are called "proportionalist."*

- (1) Most nonbelieving moralists and even some Christian ethicists and moral theologians try to justify making exceptions to specific moral norms, including those which the Church always has proposed as absolute.

- (a) They hold that while certain kinds of acts always involve a disvalue, the choice of an act of such a kind can be right, for the disvalue involved is only a nonmoral evil.
 - (b) They admit that even nonmoral evil detracts from the well-being of persons (by impeding, harming, or destroying their very lives or some other value intrinsic to their full being).
 - (c) But they claim that such disvalue can be offset by a proportionate (some say "commensurate") reason. On their view, a possible act (considered with all its circumstances, consequences, and ends in view) which brings about such disvalue may be rightly chosen if it promises greater value than disvalue (or, according to some, a better outcome than available alternatives).
- (2) Since the proportionalist standard both requires the comparative assessment of values and disvalues, and is supposed to yield moral norms which will direct free choices, one cannot apply this standard unless one can *rationally* commensurate (weigh or count up in order to compare) the goods and evils offered by possibilities for choice. But *rational* commensuration is not possible in this case.
- (a) When one must make a moral judgment, one cannot carry out the required rational commensuration of the values and disvalues promised by the various possibilities for choice.
 - i) Whenever one must make a free choice, one faces an open future, with much unpredictability. One's human providence can neither reach so far nor comprehend so much that one could ever know that one will bring about less evil by violating the moral absolute than by following it.
 - ii) If one could carry out the required *rational* commensuration of the values and disvalues involved in alternative possibilities available for choice, the possibilities offering less value or more disvalue would lose their appeal, and no free choice would be possible. But free choices are possible.
 - iii) Of course, by using the subjective scale of one's feelings, one can commensurate the values and disvalues involved in alternative possibilities available for choice. By the priorities it sets, one's choice itself also establishes a certain *nonrational* commensuration.
 - iv) The incompatibility between free choice and the rational commensuration which proportionalism requires explains why philosophies which include both an anthropology and an ethical theory, and accept either psychological determinism or proportionalism, usually accept both.
 - (b) Technical reflection, by assuming definite goals, can limit what must be taken into account. But moral reflection is not limited by a definite goal attainable by human efforts.

- i) Economics, technology, and every sort of art can judge what is best by commensurating the potential advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to the solution of a problem.
- ii) Human fulfillment embraces more than can be achieved by solving any set of problems. For an essential part of human persons' fulfillment is their relationship to reality--especially their relationship to other persons and to God.
- iii) Therefore, moral reflection cannot judge what is right by commensurating the potential advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to the solution of any particular problem or series of problems.

Thesis 21: Some proportionalists claim that if proportionalism is unworkable, the traditional principle of double effect also is unworkable. This claim is mistaken.

- (1) They rightly take for granted the workability of the traditional principle of double effect, which requires that there be a due proportion between the good hoped for and the evil accepted. They argue that since the principle of double effect is workable, proportionalism also is workable.
 - (a) They point out that the traditional principle of double effect assumes that one can know the proportion of good to bad to be expected if one either chooses to do or chooses not to do the act having two effects.
 - (b) They assume that the sort of commensuration required to apply the principle of double effect would suffice for using proportionalism in certain cases to which the principle of double effect does not apply.
- (2) The answer to this argument is that the proportionate reason required by the principle of double effect is determined in a way which does not meet the requirements of proportionalism.
 - (a) The proportionate reason required for double effect can be determined without rationally comparing premoral values and disvalues.
 - i) People can assess prospective values and disvalues subjectively, and such an assessment can provide data to which one can apply a moral principle and so reach a moral judgment.
 - ii) For example, one who is considering doing an act which will have side effects harmful to another can assess the seriousness of those side effects by asking "How would I feel if someone did the same thing to me?" and can apply the Golden Rule to the subjective answer.
 - iii) This leads to a moral judgment, for if one would not wish others to do the same thing to oneself, one can judge the bad side effects to be disproportionate inasmuch as accepting them would be unfair.
 - (b) But the same procedure is not available to a proportionalist.

- i) Proportionalism's proposed standard involves only the comparative assessment of supposedly premoral values and disvalues. Thus, if one could make moral judgments as proportionalists propose, one would use no moral principle other than proportionalism itself in making them.
- ii) Some nonbelieving proportionalists admit that the comparison of values they propose is merely subjective. But Catholic proportionalists cannot admit that the comparative assessment they propose is not rational but merely subjective.
- iii) Therefore, proportionalists cannot employ either element of the procedure by which one can judge proportionate reason in applying the principle of double effect.

Thesis 22: Proportionalist theories are irreconcilable with a Christian conception of the relationship between human responsibility and divine providence.

- (1) One can see why nonbelieving moralists (such as Bentham, Marx, and Dewey) adopt a proportionalist ethics.
 - (a) They think of action as if it were technique.
 - i) They secularize the idea of the heavenly kingdom and suppose that morality is merely a means for promoting human well-being in this world.
 - ii) They conceive of human well-being as if it were a definite goal or set of goals which might be attained by sufficiently well organized, technically sophisticated, and powerful human efforts.
 - (b) They hold that moral value is reducible to other sorts of value.
 - i) They deny that human persons can make free choices.
 - ii) They attempt to reduce moral value to the efficiency which makes for success in bringing about certain nonmoral values--values which lie outside self-determining free choices and their per se effects.
- (2) But the presuppositions of such nonbelieving moralists are at odds with Catholic faith.
 - (a) Faith teaches us to seek first God's kingdom, which is not a definite and limited human goal or set of goals. Rather, it is the fulfillment of God's inclusive plan of creation and redemption.
 - (b) Human persons are called to cooperate freely and responsibly in the fulfillment of God's plan.
 - (c) Moral absolutes--and the other moral truths as well--direct human persons in this cooperation with God.
 - i) The realization of the kingdom will depend on God, and human persons and societies can at best help prepare materials for it.

- ii) The most important of these materials are the persons and interpersonal communions we form by our self-determining free choices.
- (3) According to a Christian conception of God's providence, only God knows what good is to be realized and evil avoided or overcome for the perfection of the universe he has chosen to create. But he provides human persons with moral truths in order that they might fulfill their responsibility of cooperating in the fulfillment of his providential plan. Thus, human persons are in no position to set aside any moral truth for the sake of seeking what seems to them a better overall outcome.
- (a) When we deliberate, as soon as it becomes clear that a possible choice is excluded by a moral absolute, we realize that we have reached the boundary of our human providence.
 - (b) When we confront hard cases and are tempted to make exceptions to moral absolutes, we must remember that human responsibility can be fulfilled only in cooperation with God's providence.
- (4) Proportionalism confuses human responsibility with God's responsibility.
- (a) A Christian who accepts both proportionalism and the doctrine of providence also should accept the following as a moral principle: If in doubt about what is right, try anything.
 - i) For if one accomplishes what one attempts, one can be certain that what one did tended toward good on the whole and in the long run, since God's providence permitted it.
 - ii) And if one does not accomplish what one attempts, one can be sure that one's failure tended toward good on the whole and in the long run, since God's providence excluded the success of one's effort.
 - (b) We human persons, however, must be faithful to the moral truth which God has given us to guide our carrying out of our part in his providential plan.
 - i) We are not responsible for realizing the good and preventing the evil which God himself ultimately wills, but only for doing that good which God wills us to do and struggling against that evil which God wills us to struggle against. Thus, what is good on the whole and in the long run is no concern of human providence.
 - ii) If we are faithful, God will bring about in and through our action--both when we act as individuals and when we act as members of society--whatever good he plans and overcome any evil we must permit in order to avoid doing evil.

7. The immutability of the norms of the natural moral law

Thesis 23: The natural moral law's norms differ in mutability from its principles.

- (1) The primary principles of the natural moral law mark out the unchangeable *possibilities* for human fulfillment.
 - (a) The basis of these possibilities is in human nature. For human persons are living bodies, endowed with intelligence, able to engage in fruitful work and creative play, psychically complex, capable of more or less fully reasonable action, in need of companionship and capable of love, open to God in whose image they were made.
 - (b) Considered in their specific intelligible appetibility, the goods which will fulfill these various aspects of human persons cannot change. If they were to change, that would mean that human persons were no longer human.
 - (c) The sorts of actions which human persons can undertake to pursue these goods can change. But while such changes can lead to the development of new moral truths, they cannot lead to the contradiction of any moral truth already known.
- (2) Specific moral norms follow from moral principles when they are applied to specific kinds of actions.
 - (a) The moral norms which derive from natural law are unchangeable, except insofar as certain kinds of human actions are themselves changeable.
 - (b) Actions whose very meaning depends upon complex social, political, economic, cultural, or technical realities can change as the underlying realities change.
 - i) For example, charging the market rate of interest on a loan does not mean the same thing in the contemporary economy as it did in the economies of former times. Then it meant charging for the borrower's need, and so was rightly condemned as always unjust. Today, it need not have that meaning, and so can be licit.
 - ii) The moral truth has not changed; rather, the action to be directed by the moral norm, while in one respect the same (charging the market rate of interest), in another respect has changed (from always charging for the borrower's need to not always charging for that).
 - (c) However, the more immediately an act's meaning depends on the nature of human persons, the less that act's meaning can change.
 - i) Marital fidelity and fruitful married love have been and still can be better understood and appreciated.
 - ii) Nevertheless, their essential reality, which the relevant moral absolutes safeguard, does not depend on prior, complex realities, and so remains exactly what it always has been. Thus, in renewing marriage, Jesus appealed to God's plan in creating man and woman.

- iii) Therefore, the core meaning of kinds of actions such as adultery and contraception is immutable.

Thesis 24: The natural moral law does not vary with the diversity of times and cultures.

- (1) Some argue that morality is historically and socioculturally particular.
 - (a) They argue that abstract moral truth can hold always and everywhere, but concrete moral norms necessarily belong to some particular society and shape its way of life during some definite historical epoch.
 - (b) Therefore, they conclude, morality is historically relative. Moral norms are not true always, but only for a certain period of human history. Supposedly unchanging human nature actually changes.
 - (c) Moreover, they think that morality is socioculturally particular. Moral norms are not true everywhere, but only for those who share the way of life they actually shape. Supposedly universal human nature actually differs in its social and cultural particularizations.
- (2) The answer to this argument: historical relativity and sociocultural particularity hold true of the moralities of fallen humankind as such, but not of humankind insofar as it is redeemed in Christ.
 - (a) Human nature in its historical actuality has been changed for the worse by original sin.
 - i) In dividing human persons from God, sin also divided them against one another, and so divided the community of humankind into many diverse, particular communities.
 - ii) In different degrees, each of these communities is closed upon itself, at odds with its neighbors, and more interested in its own fulfillment than in integral human fulfillment.
 - iii) Having conformed more or less successfully to the conditions of their historical epoch, sinful societies ignore or reject those moral truths which would require them to change radically or abandon their morally defective sociocultural adjustments.
 - iv) Institutionalized rationalizations blind each community to aspects of its own world view and way of life which are at odds with reality and moral truth.
 - (b) Human nature in its historical actuality also has been changed for the better by God's redemptive work in Jesus.
 - i) Jesus, the perfect man, reveals to human persons what they can and should be. His world view and way of life are not particularized by sin, but conform to reality and moral truth.
 - ii) Jesus calls all human persons to himself. His new covenant communion, the Church, is open to all human persons. So, the Church offers divided humankind an opportunity to overcome its divisions and particularities.

- iii) All who enter into the new covenant communion receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who enlightens and empowers those renewed in Christ to live as befits children of God. Therefore, provided that Christians remain in grace, they can live as good human persons.
 - iv) Moreover, the Church is a definite society which has its proper way of life. So, the morality which the Church teaches is not universal merely as abstract truth. It is the norms of her universal communion.
- (c) Therefore, human nature both changes in some way and remains the same in some way. If it did not remain the same, those who differed in nature from Adam would not need salvation in Jesus, and those who differed in nature from Jesus could not follow him and receive salvation through him.
- i) Jesus remains the same--yesterday, today, and forever. Human nature concretely remains the same in him. Therefore, the standard of human perfection which he embodies and manifests also remains the same.
 - ii) Human nature concretely changes insofar as it is gradually renewed in Jesus. Just as St. Paul, by handing on what he had received, taught the Greeks and Romans a purer humanism than the noblest of them had achieved, so the Church, by faithfully proclaiming the Gospel, shows the people of every age and culture how their imperfect moral standards may be rectified.

Thesis 25: The fact that moral teaching develops does not show that the norms of natural moral law change.

- (1) Some cite examples of the development of moral teaching, talk about "historical consciousness," and seem to wish to argue that the development of moral teaching shows that the norms of natural moral law are mutable.
 - (a) They argue that the magisterium of the Church itself must acknowledge that there has been a development of moral belief and teaching, not only between the Old Testament and the New Testament, but also within Christian history, and even in recent times. They cite examples, saying, for instance, that until Vatican II the Church condemned religious liberty, but that the Council declared religious liberty to be a fundamental human right.
 - (b) Such development, they suggest, points to the historicity of morality. From this they apparently wish to draw the conclusion that the norms of natural moral law can change.
- (2) The answer to this is that moral teaching does develop, but later developments do not contradict moral truths constantly and most firmly handed on by the whole tradition.
 - (a) Since morality is intrinsic to faith, Christian moral belief and teaching really develop, just as dogma does. But what the Church explicitly

believes and teaches at a later time never contradicts what she believed and taught constantly and most firmly in former times.

- i) Vatican II's teaching on religious liberty clearly develops the earlier teaching but does not contradict it. This point needs to be stated carefully, but can be sketched briefly.
 - ii) The Church previously condemned: *Religious truth is unavailable, or if it is available is either unimportant or purely subjective; therefore, religion should be a purely private concern, and people ought to be free to believe as they see fit.*
 - iii) Vatican II teaches: *Religious truth is essential for human fulfillment and available to people who sincerely seek it; therefore, people ought to be free to seek religious truth, accept what they recognize as religious truth when they find it, and try to live by it.*
- (b) In the field of morality, sin makes it difficult even for Christians to draw out all the implications of the Gospel.
- i) Certain moral truths have emerged and been acknowledged only gradually. For instance, the idea that anyone can be born a slave--someone else's property--never was morally right, but its wrongness, long concealed in a world and even in a Church not yet perfectly renewed in Christ, gradually became clear as the agricultural economy gave way to the industrial economy, and the unjust institution of slavery became less tempting.
 - ii) While the Church's teaching in former times on some matters fell short of the moral truth which she is able to teach today, the Church never taught that slavery is good and right in the way that she always has believed and taught that marital fidelity and faithful marital intercourse open to new life are good and right.

Thesis 26: Christian morality shapes the life of the community of the faithful to differ from the life styles of non-Christians among whom they live.

- (1) To a great extent, the life styles of non-Christians are shaped by their particular society and epoch.
 - (a) Most people's social and historical horizons are limited by their particularity.
 - (b) They easily forget or set aside moral truths discovered in former times and other places.
 - (c) Even when outstanding individuals, such as Socrates and the Buddha, in their search for moral truths, in important respects transcend their own cultures, they still fall far short of the full truth. Thus, they teach world views and ways of life which never can be the common philosophy and morality for all men and women of good will.
- (2) The life style of Catholics is shaped by their Catholic faith.

- (a) The Catholic Church remains one throughout the course of history and throughout the world.
- (b) Her moral teaching develops under the challenges of diverse historical epochs and sociocultural conditions.
- (c) Her self-consistency and faithfulness to tradition prevent her from forgetting or setting aside any moral truth discovered in former times or grasped by any segment of her universal communion today.

8. Conscience and the magisterium

Thesis 27: As the Christian tradition understands conscience, its role is to bring moral truth to bear on one's life.

- (1) In the Christian tradition, "conscience" refers to the person's awareness of moral truths.
 - (a) The word is used in a wide sense (GS 16) to refer both to one's ability to know moral truths and to one's exercise of this ability, including one's grasp of the principles of natural law and specific moral norms, as well as one's ultimate judgment concerning right and wrong.
 - (b) The word is used in a narrow and more proper sense to refer to one's ultimate judgment concerning right and wrong--that is, one's last and best judgment either as to what one ought to do or as to one's moral guilt or innocence for one's past action.
 - (c) In Scripture, "heart" and "mind" refer not to emotion and opinion but to the inner person in general.
 - i) Sometimes these words are used in connection with scriptural teaching concerning conscience: God's law is retained in the heart, the natural law is written on the heart, the Christian lives by the Spirit with a renewed mind, and so on.
 - ii) This language shows that conscience's great dignity comes from God-given moral truth.
- (2) Understood as one's last and best judgment as to what one ought to do, conscience binds.
 - (a) Everyone ought to choose in accord with what he or she believes to be moral truth.
 - (b) "Freedom of conscience" often is erroneously taken to mean freedom to do as one pleases. Nobody has freedom of this sort in relation to conscience, since moral truths bind everyone.
 - (c) Rightful freedom of conscience is the freedom to follow moral truth against the arbitrary impositions of those in power.
 - (d) This freedom is used properly only if one strives to know moral truths and to avoid errors of conscience.
- (3) Yet conscience can err either inculpably or culpably.

- (a) Conscience can err through no fault of one's own.
 - i) Those whose conscience errs through no fault of their own are innocent in following it.
 - ii) Yet, since moral truths direct toward human well-being, their actions which objectively deviate from moral truths are likely to harm themselves and/or others.
- (b) Conscience can err through one's own fault.
 - i) Those whose conscience errs through their own fault must follow it, since it is their best judgment.
 - ii) Still, they are not innocent in following their erring conscience, since they are responsible for their judgment's deviation from moral truth.
 - iii) Moreover, their action also will lead to more or less serious harm.
- (4) Since conscience binds and yet can err culpably, and since errors of conscience also cause harm, everyone has a basic moral responsibility to form a correct conscience.

Thesis 28: As many today understand conscience, its role is to assert the self against everything which might limit it. Understood in this subjectivist way, conscience inevitably conflicts with the magisterium.

- (1) Traditionally understood, conscience works in harmony with the magisterium.
 - (a) Conscience binds persons at the moment of choice because they have no better knowledge of the relevant moral truth, and they must live by moral truth to play their part in God's plan.
 - (b) The magisterium is a God-given help to knowing moral truths. It helps one to form a correct conscience.
- (2) However, for those who deny that there is any source of meaning and value beyond the human, conscience becomes merely subjective.
 - (a) Although they may continue to acknowledge and respect many moral truths, those who deny any source of meaning and value beyond the human open themselves to a devastating relativism.
 - i) According to this relativism, moral judgment cannot be objectively grounded, and moral norms are nothing more than the attempts of societies to control their members and of individuals to influence one another's behavior.
 - ii) In this relativistic context, "conscience" refers to the individual's subjective judgment as to what is most authentic for himself or herself--what will best serve his or her interests in the face of every pressure to conform to others' standards.
 - (b) While traditional treatments of conscience talk about how conscience binds, contemporary discussions of conscience often talk about freedom and claim for conscience authority against everything beyond the individual.

- i) Today, the role in moral life which according to the Christian tradition rightfully belongs to conscience all too often is played by an impostor, subjectivist conscience--or, at least, by a conscience influenced by subjectivism.
 - ii) The result is forgetfulness of conscience's basic responsibility: to judge according to moral truths.
 - iii) Thus, every time the magisterium makes an important pronouncement on a moral issue, the media of communication publish assurances that Catholics who think differently are free to follow their conscience on the matter, despite the "official teaching of the Church."
- (3) In this subjectivist perspective, the moral truths handed on throughout the Church's tradition seem to be no more than one body of opinion among others.
- (a) To those who share this perspective, the magisterium seems authoritarian. They think that the magisterium is trying to impose its opinion on the faithful in violation of their right to follow their autonomous conscience.
 - (b) Catholics imbued with this perspective think they may freely criticize the Church's teaching, accepting what they like and rejecting what they do not.

Thesis 29: By teaching objective moral truths, the magisterium helps Catholics to fulfill their responsibility to form a correct conscience.

- (1) In the fallen human condition, the moral truth naturally accessible to human persons is obscured.
- (a) Personal sin and the tendency to practice self-deception and rationalization easily obscure moral truths which in themselves are nearly self-evident.
 - (b) The biases of one's society, class, profession, family, and so on not only obscure moral truths but form one from childhood onward in moral falsehood: prejudices against certain sorts of people, unjust structures, decadent life styles, and so forth.
 - (c) Moreover, even decent and thoughtful people cannot by themselves discover how to live uprightly in the world broken by sin.
- (2) When the Gospel has been adequately proclaimed, people of good will, moved by God's grace, judge that they should accept the faith and seek baptism. The judgment that one should accept the faith is itself a judgment of conscience.
- (a) A moral truth which human persons can naturally know directs them to seek religious truth, to accept it when they find it, and to live by it.
 - (b) Religious truth in its fullness is given by God's revelation in Jesus.

- (c) This truth in no way opposes but perfectly satisfies an upright conscience; it liberates those who accept it from moral confusion and frustration.
- (3) God gives Catholics the magisterium to help them know the Gospel's truth.
 - (a) Included in Catholic faith is the belief that the magisterium communicates, safeguards, and explains the way of Jesus.
 - i) The Church sacramentally ordains the pope and other bishops to act on Jesus' behalf.
 - ii) Jesus sends them with full power to teach in his name. They are, as it were, his ambassadors.
 - iii) The Holy Spirit assists them to do so faithfully.
 - (b) Therefore, the magisterium's authority in moral teaching reduces to three things.
 - i) The Gospel has authority insofar as it is God's word.
 - ii) The popes and bishops enjoy the personal authority of the Lord who sent them to preach, safeguard, and develop the truth contained in the Gospel.
 - iii) The popes and bishops preach and teach with the sure gift of truth, guaranteed by the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit.
 - (c) The Church declares and clarifies the principles of natural law, which sin obscured, and teaches how to fulfill these principles in the fallen world, namely, by following Jesus.
- (4) The teaching authority and the governing authority of the Church often are confused with one another. They should be distinguished, since conscience relates to them differently.
 - (a) Some today object: The Church functions toward her members as a governing authority, and so Catholics responsibly follow her teaching only if it agrees with their own judgments of conscience.
 - (b) The answer is that the Church's moral magisterium is distinct from her pastors' governing authority.
 - i) By their governing authority, the pope and other bishops make laws to shape the common life of all the Church's members. Catholics responsibly conform to these laws only by their own judgments of conscience, which must conform to moral truth.
 - ii) Likewise, the Church's pastors, in exercising their governing authority, must conform to the moral truth which they themselves teach when they function as the Church's magisterium.
 - iii) In carrying out its task, the Church's moral magisterium does speak with authority. But this authority must not be misunderstood. The moral magisterium makes no laws; instead, it teaches moral truths, and sound conscience is subordinate to moral truths, not their judge.
 - iv) Insofar as the faithful legitimately exercise critical reflection on the moral norms proposed by the magisterium, that reflection is the function of theology and ethics, not of conscience.

- (5) Catholics respond to the magisterium's work in different ways.
 - (a) Catholics are inconsistent and, if clearheaded, violate their own conscience if they freely commit themselves to Catholic faith and yet choose to ignore or reject moral truths which the Church teaches constantly and most firmly.
 - (b) Faithful Catholics have more confidence in the ability of the Church as a whole, guided by the magisterium, to discern moral truths than in the ability of any part of the Church or isolated individual, including themselves, to do so.

9. Dissent from the magisterium; the magisterium and theology

Introduction: Theological dissent from the magisterium, especially on some moral questions, is a serious disorder in the Church today.

- (1) Under challenge are constant and most firm moral teachings, for example, those concerning contraception, abortion, extramarital sexual behavior, and attempted second marriage by those whose true marriage is sacramental and consummated.
- (2) To understand and evaluate today's theological dissent, one must distinguish among:
 - (a) Religious assent and the theoretically possible licit nonassent to some noninfallibly proposed Church teaching.
 - (b) The limits of such licit nonassent's legitimate expression as dissent.
 - (c) Today's theological dissent, which claims to be a reasonable exercise and modest extension of the possibility of licit dissent.

Thesis 30: Catholics owe religious assent to noninfallible teachings which the magisterium proposes as certain. However, this obligation is limited, and under certain conditions nonassent is justified.

- (1) Religious assent is that assent which Catholics owe to teachings of the Church which are not proposed by the universal, ordinary magisterium, but otherwise meet the conditions for teachings infallibly proposed.
 - (a) They bear on a matter of faith or morals.
 - (b) They are proposed by the pope or one's own bishop, acting in his official capacity.
 - (c) They are proposed as certain.
 - (d) They are *not* proposed by the universal, ordinary magisterium--that is by the pope and other bishops agreeing in and proposing the same position.

- (2) Religious assent is an act of human faith rooted in divine faith itself. This act of human faith is grounded both in the sacramental teaching role of popes and other bishops, and in the relationship of the teaching's content to truths known to be revealed.
 - (a) Jesus gives popes and bishops their teaching role.
 - (b) Popes and bishops enjoy the grace of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling their role.
 - (c) Any teaching which calls for religious assent is at least partly drawn from truths of faith.
- (3) However, the obligation to give religious assent does not extend to everything popes or bishops say. In many cases, the obligation does not come into play, and the duties of faithful Catholics are only to listen respectfully, to try to understand what their pastors are saying, and to obey legitimate disciplinary directives.
 - (a) Popes and bishops sometimes express opinions on matters outside faith and morals.
 - (b) Sometimes they speak or write on matters of faith and morals but not in their official capacity.
 - (c) Sometimes they teach officially but only tentatively.
 - (d) Sometimes they put forward observations and arguments only incidental to a point they propose as certain.
 - (e) Sometimes they give merely disciplinary directives.
- (4) Some teachings which call for religious assent do not appear to depend on any nonrevealed truth; others plainly depend in part on at least one nonrevealed truth.
 - (a) Sometimes the teaching could be a revealed truth, for popes and other bishops not only teach the truths of faith which they have received, but clarify and defend them with the help of the Holy Spirit.
 - i) At the frontier of the development of doctrine and its expression, bishops (even the pope when not speaking *ex cathedra*) do not individually enjoy the gift of discerning infallibly what belongs to divine truth.
 - ii) In that situation, therefore, although a teaching they noninfallibly propose as certain may in fact pertain to faith, no one can be sure that it is part of the deposit of faith or closely connected with it.
 - iii) So, such a teaching calls only for religious assent, together with readiness to accept it in faith if the magisterium eventually makes it clear that one ought to do so.
 - (b) Sometimes the teaching is a theological conclusion or prudential judgment.
 - i) Popes and other bishops not only hand on the faith, but form in the Church a common outlook for the sake of solidarity in the common work of catechesis, evangelization, liturgical practice, and so on.

- ii) Quite often, teachings proposed for this purpose unavoidably join truths of faith with propositions extrinsic to faith which seem true.
 - iii) If such teachings concern theoretical questions, they are theological doctrines. For example, the teaching that the mystical body of Christ is not an organic body presupposes a proposition, which does not pertain to revelation, concerning the nature of organic bodies, namely, that no organic body can consist of many substantially distinct individuals.
 - iv) If they concern practical questions, they are prudential judgments intended to guide the Church's own actions. For example, the prudential judgment that children ought to make their first confession before making their first Communion presupposes a proposition, which does not pertain to revelation, concerning the probable consequences of young people growing up without a habit of using the sacrament of penance.
 - v) Since the propositions extrinsic to faith on which teachings of this sort depend are not accepted with faith, such teachings call only for religious assent.
- (5) The responsibility to give religious assent is limited, because sometimes one can be sure beyond reasonable doubt that a teaching is mistaken, although otherwise it would call for religious assent. The limits of the responsibility to give religious assent thus vary with the different ways in which papal and episcopal teachings, although proposed as certainly true, can seem surely mistaken.
- (a) A more authoritative teaching can limit the responsibility to give assent.
 - i) If one were sure beyond reasonable doubt that some element of papal or episcopal teaching is incompatible with a truth of faith asserted in Scripture, solemnly defined, or already proposed infallibly by the ordinary magisterium, one's act of faith would block religious assent to that element of teaching.
 - ii) If the teaching of one's bishop (or of a group of bishops including one's own) which would otherwise call for religious assent were at odds with papal teaching, religious assent to the latter would block assent to the former.
 - iii) A teaching of a general council which is not infallibly proposed calls at least for the religious assent due to the teaching of the pope who confirms it, and so supersedes any incompatible, prior papal and episcopal teachings which otherwise would call for religious assent.
 - (b) Contrary knowledge can limit responsibility.
 - i) Papal and episcopal teachings which are theological doctrines or prudential judgments partly depend upon propositions which do not pertain to faith but seem true to the teachers of the Church.

- ii) But such propositions can be false, and someone who knows the relevant subject matter can be sure beyond reasonable doubt of the contrary truth.
- iii) That reasonable judgment limits the responsibility of religious assent, since one cannot reasonably assent to elements of a theological doctrine or prudential judgment which one is sure beyond all reasonable doubt are mistaken.

Thesis 31: Under certain conditions, it is legitimate for Catholics to express their nonassent--that is, to dissent from a teaching noninfallibly proposed by the magisterium.

- (1) Since the assent of faith should be given to teachings which pertain to faith, one must be sure beyond all reasonable doubt that a teaching does *not* pertain to faith before one utters anything which might tend to call that teaching into question.
 - (a) To dissent from a truth of faith could mislead others with respect to it.
 - (b) To utter such dissent probably would make it more difficult to correct one's own error.
- (2) Even if one is sure that one is dealing with a matter which does not pertain to faith, one should avoid claiming for one's position more certitude than one can have.
 - (a) People who are humble and honest know that they can easily be mistaken about something even when they are sure about it beyond all reasonable doubt.
 - (b) One's subjective certitude is of little legitimate use to anyone else. What is useful are the reasons for one's judgment. One can state one's reasons for having a difficulty with some teaching without saying that one does not assent to it. Much less need one assert that the teaching is false.
- (3) Of itself, any expression of dissent tends to lessen both the confidence of the faithful in the magisterium and the credibility to non-Catholics of the Church's proclamation of the Gospel. Therefore, an expression of dissent can be justified only if it is necessary for some important purpose.
 - (a) There are two legitimate reasons to express dissent.
 - i) To call the matter to the attention of the magisterium. This usually can be accomplished with little or no publicity.
 - ii) To discuss the difficulty with others who are capable of understanding it and who might help to resolve it or are troubled by it. This often can be done privately, but sometimes might require the use of media of communication appropriate to the relevant audience.
 - (b) There are many *illegitimate* reasons for expressing dissent. For example:

- i) To put political pressure on the magisterium--that is, the pressure of numbers and public opinion--instead of relying on evidence and reasons to bring the magisterium to rectify what one thinks is its mistake.
- ii) To encourage the faithful to deal with what one regards as the magisterium's mistake, not by helping them to see for themselves the truth which one thinks one sees, but by leading them to replace trust in the magisterium with trust in some other sort of authority--for example, the authority of theological expertise.
- iii) To retain or gain for oneself status or respectability in the eyes of others, Catholic or not, who do not accept the teaching in question.
- iv) To assist--perhaps for profit--individuals, groups, or organizations, including media of communication, whose purposes are other than one of the purposes which justify dissent.

Thesis 32: Today's dissenting theologians try to justify their dissent, but their attempted justification cannot withstand criticism.

- (1) In trying to justify their *dissent*, today's dissenting theologians try to show that their *nonassent* is justified. To do this, they appeal to the contemporary experience of Christians, to proportionalism, and to their own consensus. They also claim that the magisterium's rational arguments are unsound.
 - (a) They appeal to the contemporary experience of Christians. But, as shown above, this appeal is inconsistent with the Catholic concept of revelation and faith.
 - (b) They appeal to the proportionalist argument against moral absolutes. But, as shown above, the proportionalist argument not only is rationally indefensible but also is inconsistent with a Christian conception of the relationship between human responsibility and God's providence.
 - (c) They appeal to the consensus of theologians in favor of dissenting opinions.
 - i) This appeal to consensus either is intended to put pressure on the magisterium or to impress the faithful with the authority of dissenting theologians or both. Either of these purposes evidences that the dissent is carried on for a bad reason.
 - ii) Moreover, the sheer number of voices expressing a view does not strengthen the grounds for accepting it.
 - iii) And besides, the consensus of theologians is not as extensive as dissenting theologians claim, since many Catholic theologians hold and defend the Church's teaching.
 - (d) They accuse the magisterium of using inconclusive rational argumentation to support the moral norms it reaffirms.
 - i) But rational argumentation in the field of ethics is notoriously difficult. Even some dissenting theologians have admitted that

their own rational arguments are no more conclusive than those of the magisterium.

- ii) Even if the arguments which the magisterium offers for the moral norms it reaffirms are not rationally conclusive, they usually are persuasive to those who consider them with open minds.
 - iii) Most important, even if the rational argumentation which the magisterium offers for a moral norm it reaffirms were entirely inconclusive, that fact would not remove the ground in faith for accepting that moral norm as true, inasmuch as it is part of the Christian way of life which today's Church has received and teaches as pertaining to faith.
- (2) Today's dissenting moral theologians have no strong theological warrants for their opinions.
- (a) They do not establish their opinions from Scripture, the writings of Church fathers and doctors, or the teachings of Church councils, popes, and bishops.
 - (b) After all, revelation and the Church's teaching cannot plausibly be interpreted as commending contraception, homosexual behavior, choices to kill the innocent, divorce and remarriage, and so forth.
 - (c) Thus, the dissenting theologians deal with legitimate theological sources only to try to show that, appearances notwithstanding, the tradition somehow leaves room for their dissenting views.
- (3) Dissenting moral theologians often argue that the Church has solemnly defined little or nothing in the moral field. They point out that any noninfallible teaching could be mistaken, and they claim that they do not dissent from any infallible teaching of the Church. But this claim is not sound.
- (a) One part of the answer to this is that some dissenting theologians do in fact dissent from Catholic teachings solemnly defined by the Council of Trent on polygamy and on the indissolubility of marriage.
 - (b) The other part of the answer is that the Church teaches infallibly many truths which she has not solemnly defined.
 - i) Infallibility is not an external seal contingently applied to the Church's faith in regard to this or that particular point, but the sure gift by which the body of the faithful as a whole accurately accepts divine revelation and avoids all error in regard to it.
 - ii) But the magisterium is not apart from the body of the faithful. Rather, the magisterium is the organ by which the Church corporately articulates her faith.
 - iii) So, the magisterium teaches infallibly not only when it solemnly defines, but also when it universally proposes one and the same position on a matter of faith and morals as a truth--revealed or closely related to revelation--to be held definitively.
 - (c) Today's theological dissent is from teachings infallibly proposed.

- i) In the past, the whole Catholic Church has accepted the moral norms at issue as essential requirements of the following of Jesus.
 - ii) The Church today must continue to believe and teach these moral norms as pertaining to faith.
- (d) It may be that some popes and bishops or groups of bishops have proposed as certain some moral teachings which were in fact mistaken. However, such teachings were not infallibly proposed. Hence, it is irrelevant for dissenting theologians to appeal, as they sometimes do, to historical examples of such mistakes to show that teachings which have been proposed infallibly could be mistaken.
- (4) Today's theological dissent is not legitimate dissent.
- (a) It goes far beyond what is necessary to call the matters at issue to the magisterium's attention.
 - (b) It does not so much make a case against the teachings it challenges as offer pastoral encouragement to act contrary to them.
 - (c) It convinces those to whom it is addressed less by its appeal to their reason than by its appeal to their interests and feelings--for example, their respect for majorities and for personal freedom.
 - (d) It is not communicated only to those able to evaluate it critically, but to the faithful at large who are inclined to accept it because of their habitual trust in Catholic theologians.
 - (e) There is solid reason to judge that many who engage in theological dissent do so for one or more of the illegitimate reasons for expressing dissent.

Thesis 33: With few exceptions, today's dissenting theologians act as pastors or catechists. Insofar as they do so, they are insubordinate to the Church's pastoral leaders in whose magisterium they participate. The dissenting theologians' abuse of their office also causes grave harm to the faithful.

- (1) Until quite recently, almost all Catholic theologians have been not only scholars but men in sacred orders who have collaborated closely in the magisterium's work.
 - (a) They have been authorized by popes and bishops to teach Catholic doctrine, especially in seminaries, and so have shared in exercising the magisterium's authority.
 - (b) The faithful at large and confessors have looked to moral theologians as experts in respect to the moral truths which the Church teaches.
- (2) Most who dissent do so in exercising an office by which they participate in the magisterium.
 - (a) In dissenting, they tell the faithful that Catholics need only take the Church's teaching into account as one factor among others.
 - (b) They also tell the faithful that they may follow dissenting theological opinions if these opinions are acceptable to their own consciences.

- (c) In giving this advice, the dissenting theologians act against their pastoral leaders or, at least, the most authoritative of them, namely, the pope. Thus, they abuse their office and act insubordinately.
 - (d) Moreover, since they exercise their office in close cooperation with the Church's pastoral leaders, the dissenting theologians draw a portion of the collegial magisterium itself into ambivalence with respect to the Church's constant and most firm moral teaching.
- (3) Today's dissenting theologians implicitly assume a legalistic perspective and appeal to a subjectivist concept of conscience. Therefore, their dissent is damaging especially to those of the faithful who have legalistic and/or subjectivistic tendencies.
- (a) Many Catholics have tended to think and talk about moral norms legalistically, as if they were merely a body of rules binding members of the Church to acceptable standards of behavior.
 - i) To pastors and theologians who share this legalistic perspective, it does not seem very important whether the faithful know moral truth and live by it. Instead, it seems sufficient that they not deliberately disobey the Church's clear moral teaching. ("It is enough to leave them in good faith!")
 - ii) To those who take this legalistic perspective for granted, it seems that the moral norms which the Church teaches are in force only insofar as the faithful are certain of their obligatoriness. ("Doubtful laws never bind!")
 - (b) Moral theologians who dissent from the magisterium's teachings and pastorally instruct the faithful that they may follow dissenting opinions implicitly appeal to the legalistic perspective.
 - i) Generally, the dissenting theologians suppose that they can help the faithful to avoid sinning against the moral norm the Church teaches by persuading them that the existence of theological dissent makes the moral norm doubtful and nonbinding.
 - ii) They assume that the burden of proof lies with the magisterium. So, they do not think it necessary to try to show that their dissenting views follow from moral principles, but simply call certain norms the Church teaches into question and suppose that their being in question nullifies them in practice.
 - (c) This appeal to legalism confirms the faithful in their pre-existing legalistic tendencies, with bad effects both for individuals and for the Church as a whole.
 - i) Legalism treats moral truths, which lead to fulfillment, as if they were mere positive laws. In doing so, it detaches the living of Christian life from the good to be realized in and through living it, and so weakens the motivation hope should give. Therefore, legalism encourages minimalism with respect to the more demanding requirements of following Jesus, enhances the influence of other

motives on the shaping of Christians' lives, lessens their interest in and responsiveness to personal vocation, and greatly reduces their resistance to temptation.

- ii) Insofar as the faithful who rely on dissenting opinions do so with a legalistic mentality, they tenaciously cling to legalism, and so resist the renewal of the Church planned by Vatican II. For that renewal calls for a deeper understanding of the Gospel and a more profound commitment its truth. But legalism impedes insight into the mystery of Christ in us, and obscures the inherent worth of following him.
- (d) Today's dissenting theologians lead many of the faithful not only into error on specific moral questions but also into subjectivism.
 - i) These theologians instruct the faithful to use their conscience to judge the truth of the teaching proposed by the magisterium.
 - ii) However, conscience cannot judge between the magisterium's teaching and theological dissent from it without subjecting both to some common criterion.
 - iii) But the faithful at large plainly cannot reduce the questions at issue to genuine theological sources and to the principles of morality.
 - iv) Therefore, the dissenting theologians appeal to criteria such as "experience" and "practicability," whose ultimate ground is merely subjective.
 - v) But the adoption of a merely subjective criterion in one matter (for example, contraception) provides a precedent for dealing with any other matter in which one finds it difficult to accept Catholic teaching. Some of the faithful apply this precedent not only to other moral questions but to matters of faith as well.
 - vi) Thus, the faithful who rely on theological dissent are led to accept subjectivism, which already is tempting to many of them, inasmuch as it pervades the cultures of all the affluent nations.

Thesis 34: Today's dissenting theologians are not Catholic theologians.

- (1) Some today argue: Since some Catholic theologians dissent from moral teachings reaffirmed by the magisterium, and since their dissent is tolerated, the magisterium itself does not really oppose putting dissenting opinions in practice.
- (2) Confronted with this argument, the abuse of pastoral office which dissent involves, and the devastating effect dissent is having on the faithful, the magisterium has no choice but to clarify the true status of theologians who engage in the type of dissent treated in *c* and *d* above.
- (3) Catholic theologians must be distinguished from theologians who are Catholics.
 - (a) Any theologian who is a Catholic is likely to take a special interest in the Catholic Church's teaching and problems, and is more likely than a

non-Catholic theologian to have received some theological education in a Catholic faculty, to hold a position in a Catholic institution, and to publish through Catholic media.

- (b) But a Catholic theologian is more than merely a theologian who is a Catholic. A Catholic theologian operates within the framework of the Catholic conception of revelation and faith, which includes the authoritative role of the Church's magisterium. Moreover, Catholic theologians subordinate their professional commitment to the Church's mission and do their work as a service to the faithful.
- (4) Theologians who engage in the type of dissent treated in c and d above are no longer Catholic theologians.
- (a) They refuse to acknowledge the true authority of the magisterium. In this and in other ways, they no longer operate within the framework of the Catholic conception of revelation and faith.
 - (b) They assert their professional autonomy and are insubordinate to the Church's pastoral leaders.
 - (c) Their work does not serve the Church but gravely harms both her renewal according to the plan of Vatican II and the souls of the faithful.
- (5) The magisterium rightly clarifies the true status of theologians who are Catholics but not Catholic theologians.
- (a) To make their status clear is not to carry out a disciplinary act but to affirm a truth.
 - (b) Because today's dissenting theologians gravely harm the faithful, clarification of their true status is a pastoral service to the faithful.
 - (c) Moreover, this truth must be stated, for, otherwise, by permitting those who dissent to misinterpret toleration of their acts as approval of their opinions, the magisterium itself would expressly teach one thing but tacitly teach another.