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## *Veritatis Splendor:* Revealed truth vs. dissent

*By Germain Grisez*

■ The Catholic Church always has taught that certain kinds of acts are intrinsically evil and that the moral norms excluding them are absolutely exceptionless—for example, one should never choose to kill an innocent person or engage in adultery. However, during the past thirty years, many Catholic moralists have tried to find ways to circumvent such teachings. While the dissent began in the early 1960s, it became widespread and intense after Pope Paul VI's publication of *Humanae vitae* in July 1968. But dissent has not been limited to denial of the proposition that contraception is always wrong. Almost everybody who dissented from that moral norm quickly moved on to reject the exceptionlessness of all the norms bearing on sex, marriage, and innocent life.

*Veritatis splendor* deals with these dissenting views. Pope John Paul begins by noting “the *lack of harmony between the traditional response of the Church and certain theological positions*, encountered

even in Seminaries and Faculties of Theology, *with regard to questions of the greatest importance* for the Church and the life of faith of Christians, as well as for the life of society itself” (4). But the Pope does not proceed by discussing specific kinds of acts (killing, adultery, and so on) and reaffirming the teachings excluding them. Instead, he takes up and rejects the *theories* which have been offered to support dissent. The encyclical has three chapters.

The first is entitled “Christ and the answer to the question about morality.” It is a commentary on the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man described in Matthew 19:16–22, and its purpose is “to bring together the essential elements of revelation in the Old and New Testament with regard to moral action” (28).

In this first chapter, Pope John Paul finds Jesus reaffirming as God's word some specific moral requirements which everyone must meet if he or she is to be saved. The Pope emphasizes that these

requirements are not arbitrary: "The commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man are meant to safeguard *the good* of the person, the image of God, by protecting his *goods*. 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery'" and so on, "express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage" (13), and so on. Thus, while Christian perfection requires more, "One can 'abide' in love only by keeping the commandments" (24).

The Pope explains that God has communicated the same moral requirements as natural law, by giving human persons understanding of what is right and wrong, and as revealed truth. Since grace perfects human nature, divinely revealed morality, while going beyond natural laws, includes it. So, as St. Paul says, the moral requirements which the Gentiles found written on their hearts were included in the law which God revealed to the Jews (see 57). And, Pope John Paul points out: "From the very lips of Jesus, the new Moses, man is once again given the commandments of the Decalogue" (12). Indeed, Jesus' "way of acting and his words, his deeds, and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life" (20). In this way, all the requirements of natural law are at least implicit in the Gospel, so that it is "the source of all saving truth and moral teaching" (28, quoting Trent, DS 1501).

The encyclical's second chapter, which is as long as the other two combined, is entitled, "The Church and the discernment of certain tendencies in present-day moral theology." In this central chapter, the Pope deals with "certain fundamental questions regarding the Church's moral teaching," sorts out the "issues being debated by ethicists and moral theologians," and, in response to dissenting views, sets

out "the principles of a moral teaching based upon Scripture and Tradition" (5).

The third chapter is entitled "Moral good for the life of the Church and of the world." This chapter presupposes the rejection of the dissenting views and goes on to draw out some implications of that rejection: the need for Catholics to turn to Jesus and be faithful to him so that they will accept, live by, and hand on the moral truth which the Church teaches; the significance of the martyrs' witness; the importance for the contemporary world of the Church's fulfilling her role as moral teacher; and the responsibilities for sound moral doctrine of teachers and priests, moral theologians, and, in particular, the bishops—to whom this encyclical is addressed.

While there are interesting and important things in the first and third chapters, and I shall touch on some of them, I shall focus here on the treatment of dissenting views in the second chapter, which deals directly with what the Pope himself identifies as the encyclical's "central theme . . . today being restated with the authority of the Successor of Peter," namely, that there are "*intrinsically evil acts*" prohibited "always and without exception" (115). This chapter has four parts: "Freedom and law," "Conscience and truth," and "Fundamental choice and specific kinds of behavior," and "The moral act."

The first part, "Freedom and law," begins by sketching out modern views which exalt human freedom so much that they end in subjectivism—the notion that every individual's moral judgment is correct for himself or herself. These views are rejected as incompatible with Christian teaching that moral requirements are, not arbitrary impositions on freedom, but expressions of the truth about what is good

for human beings. Then, after explaining what natural law is, the Pope focuses on one component of dissenting views, which I shall discuss at length. At the end of the first part, he takes up the position that morality is relative to culture rather than being universal and unchanging. Pope John Paul rejects this relativism as incompatible with two things: first, Jesus' assertion, in his teaching against divorce, of the permanent validity of God's initial plan — "from the beginning it was not so"; and, second, the unity of the human nature which all mankind shares with Christ, "who is the same yesterday and today and forever" (53).

Thus, this first part of chapter two includes many things, but the following issue is crucial. Dissenting moralists, while affirming the exceptionlessness of certain basic norms such as "Love God and neighbor" and "Respect the dignity of persons," have held that love and respect are compatible with exceptions to specific norms such as those excluding killing the innocent and adultery. In the face of the magisterium's reaffirmations of specific norms, many dissenters have accused it of "biologism" or "naturalism"—the alleged error of confusing what is naturally given with what morally ought to be.

In replying, the Pope recalls the Church's definitive teaching on the human person's unity and argues: since the human person "entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods" (48), such as bodily life and marital communion.

Ultimately, however, Pope John Paul rejects the view that love and respect for persons are compatible with exceptions

to specific norms as "*contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition*" (49). He shows this first from St. Paul, who teaches that "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Cor. 6.19) and warns various sorts of sinners—including fornicators, adulterers, and sodomites—that they "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6.9–10). Then the Pope cites the Council of Trent, which repeats Paul's warning in its solemn teaching. Moreover, the Pope teaches, "Jesus himself reaffirms that these prohibitions allow no exceptions: 'If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. . . . You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery'" (52).

### **Internal forum alluded to**

The second part of chapter two, "Conscience and truth," is comparatively brief. Some dissenting moralists, while admitting the general soundness and value of specific norms, such as those excluding killing the innocent and adultery, say that conscience must consider everything and only then make the final decision which really morally binds the individual in his or her unique situation. On this view, only conscience can decide whether an act which is generally wrong might be appropriate in a concrete situation. Pope John Paul points out:

On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the magisterium [a clear allusion to so-called internal forum solutions of marriage cases], and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept. (56)

Against, this, the Pope explains that conscience is not a "creative" decision but rather a judgment drawn from moral truths, including negative precepts which

oblige in every case (see 56). Once more, he appeals to St. Paul, this time to Romans 2:15, which “clarifies the precise nature of conscience: it is a *moral judgment about man and his actions*, a judgment either of acquittal or of condemnation, according as human acts are in conformity or not with the law of God written on the heart” (59).

Chapter two’s third part, “Fundamental choice and specific kinds of behavior,” deals with the relationship between choices of acts of specific kinds, such as killing an innocent person or committing adultery, on the one hand, and, on the other, a person’s fundamental option “for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately for or against God” (65). Some dissenting moralists, while perhaps admitting that acts traditionally regarded as intrinsically evil are always wrong, hold that such an act, even when done with full awareness and deliberate freedom, need not be a mortal sin. For, they claim, it might not reverse one’s fundamental option, which they regard as distinct from any particular choice to do this or that.

Pope John Paul rejects such theories as inconsistent with the makeup of the acting person. But even before doing so, he rejects them as “contrary to the teaching of Scripture itself, which sees the fundamental option as a genuine choice of freedom and links that choice profoundly to particular acts” (67). The “choice of freedom” which “Christian moral teaching, even in its Biblical roots, acknowledges” as fundamental is “the decision of faith . . . the *obedience of faith* (cf. Rom. 16:26) ‘by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God’” (66). Since faith is a commitment to covenantal communion with God, which is to bear fruit in works, it entails the specific requirements of the Decalogue, reaffirmed by Jesus as conditions for entering the Kingdom.

The Pope also recalls the doctrine, solemnly defined by the Council of Trent, that “the grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin” (68, quoting Trent, DS 1544; cf. DS 1577–78). Thus, since faith is the fundamental option of Christian

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*Dr. Germain Grisez, a layman, holds the Flynn Chair in Christian Ethics at Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Md. He is writing a summa of moral theology under the general title: The Way of the Lord Jesus. Its second volume, Living a Christian Life, appeared last year (Franciscan Press, 1993). Professor Grisez's last article in HPR appeared in the April 1989 issue.*



life, a deliberate choice to kill an innocent person or to commit adultery can separate a person from God's love without reversing his or her fundamental option.

### **Moral life is teleological**

The fourth and final part of chapter two, "The moral act," deals with what Pope John Paul calls "teleologism." He recognizes that "the moral life has an essential '*teleological*' character, since it consists in the deliberate ordering of human acts to God, the supreme good and ultimate end (*telos*) of man" (73). But he contrasts this teleology with "*teleologism*":

Certain *ethical theories*, called "*teleological*," claim to be concerned for the conformity of human acts with the ends pursued by the agent and with the values intended by him. The criteria for evaluating the moral rightness of an action are drawn from the *weighing of the nonmoral or premoral goods* to be gained and the corresponding nonmoral or premoral values to be respected. For some, concrete behavior would be right or wrong according to whether or not it is capable of producing a better state of affairs for all concerned. Right conduct would be the one capable of "maximizing" goods and "minimizing" evils. (74)

So, those who hold such theories—proportionalists or consequentialists—claim that one cannot tell whether an act of a kind traditionally regarded as intrinsically evil would, in fact, be morally evil until one has taken into account, in the actual circumstances, the good and bad results which it is likely to bring about. Therefore, they maintain, the foreseen proportions of "pre-moral" or "ontic" goods to bads in the available alternatives can require an exception even to such precepts as the fifth and sixth commandments, as traditionally understood.

Proportionalism and consequentialism gain some plausibility from various

things: they are a reaction to previously prevalent legalism; they use as a model for moral reasoning a method successful elsewhere; they claim to be developing the casuistry of the classical moralists; and they claim to take everything into account before judging the morality of particular human acts. The Pope acknowledges the need to overcome legalism, "to provide liberation from the constraints of a voluntaristic and arbitrary morality of obligation which would ultimately be dehumanizing" (76). He also recognizes a legitimate role for a method similar to consequentialism or proportionalism in reasoning about technical and economic matters, where the concern is only about what is more or less efficient. The Pope, moreover, notes that traditional moral theology developed a casuistry "which tried to assess the best ways to achieve the good in certain concrete situations," but points out that in this casuistry "the absolute validity of negative moral precepts, which oblige without exception, was not called into question" (76). Finally, he affirms the necessity for morally upright action of having a good intention and taking proper account of all the circumstances, including the foreseeable consequences; and he also affirms that a good intention or various circumstances can somewhat mitigate the evil of sinful acts (see 77).

### **A decision about oneself**

However, Pope John Paul firmly rejects consequentialism or proportionalism. Against this way of trying to circumvent exceptionless moral norms, he first briefly points out "the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of evaluating all the good and evil consequences and effects—defined as premoral—of one's own acts"

(77). But the Pope does not dwell on this argument. Instead, he concentrates on explaining that some kinds of acts, even when done with the good intention of achieving some important good or avoiding some great evil, are always wrong, because their "object," being at odds with the good of the person, cannot be ordered to the ultimate end, namely, God, who is all good (see 78).

The crucial insight underlying this argument is that the "object" of the moral act is precisely what one chooses. In referring to acts which are intrinsically evil, the encyclical usually uses the phrase *kinds of behavior*, and this choice of language could mislead readers into thinking that the object of the act is a morally indeterminate unit of behavior, which might be done even by someone who cannot choose freely. However, in making the argument just summarized, the Pope explains that when speaking of *behavior* he means the possible object of deliberate and free choices:

In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behavior. . . . By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world. Rather, that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person. (78)

With this conception of the object of a human act, one understands the Pope's argument, which he sums up: "Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature 'incapable of being ordered' to God because they radically contradict the good of the per-

son made in his image" (80). The point simply is: One cannot love God without loving one's neighbor as oneself, and one cannot love one's neighbor or oneself while choosing contrary to that neighbor's or one's own good.

Proportionalism and consequentialism also overlook the effect which a choice contrary to the good of a person has on the individual making that choice. So, the Pope calls attention to the self-determining character of choices. In choosing to do acts of the kinds identified by the tradition as intrinsically evil, one is not merely choosing to produce changes "in the state of affairs outside of" the will of the acting person (71). One is also making "a *decision about oneself*" (65); one is constituting oneself the sort of person who does such things.

### **Biblical evidence is cited**

But, once again, the Pope's critique finally invokes revelation: "In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture" (81). Two texts are cited, Romans 3:8 and, once more, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. The former first appears in a quotation from St. Thomas (in 78), then in the heading to sections 79-83, and finally in a quotation from *Humanae vitae*, 14, where Pope Paul taught that "it is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom. 3:8)" (80). Pope John Paul also points out: "The doctrine of the object as a source of morality represents an authentic explicitation of the Biblical morality of the Covenant and of the commandments" (82).

Besides the encyclical's treatment in chapter two of various elements of the

dissenting views, chapter three includes three other considerations which powerfully support its defense of the traditional teaching on intrinsically evil acts and the exceptionless norms forbidding them.

The first of these confirms the teaching by appealing to the witness of the martyrs: "The unacceptability of 'teleological,' 'consequentialist,' and 'proportionalist' ethical theories, which deny the existence of negative moral norms regarding specific kinds of behavior, norms which are valid without exception, is confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom" (90). Examples are cited: Susanna in the Old Testament, who was prepared to die rather than commit adultery; John the Baptist, who laid down his life in witnessing to Herod "the law of the Lord" regarding marriage; and others from the New Testament, not least Jesus himself (91). Examples from our own day can be added: Maria Goretti, who died rather than fornicate; the Uganda martyrs who preferred death to homosexual behavior; and so on. The Pope affirms that in raising such martyrs "to the honor of the altars, the Church has canonized their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances" (91). The point is that, in canonizing martyrs who gave their lives rather than violate some exceptionless norm, the Catholic Church declares — as irrevocably as she could by any solemn definition — that there are intrinsically evil acts, and that a Christian may not choose such an act even when his or her life is at stake.

Also in chapter three, the Pope points out that if there were no moral norms excluding intrinsically evil acts "valid always and for everyone, with no excep-

tion," there would be no truly inviolable rights of the human person (97):

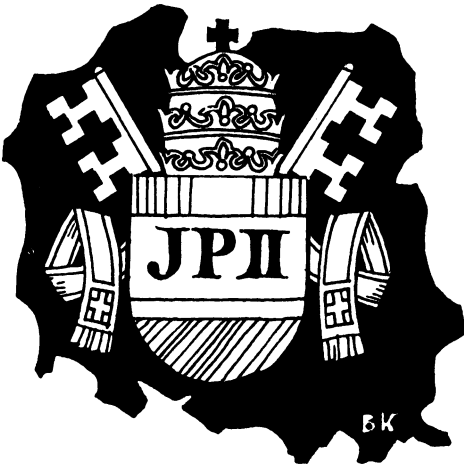
These norms in fact represent the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy, which can come into being and develop only on the basis of the equality of all its members, who possess common rights and duties. *When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone.* (96)

Thus, those who deny that there are intrinsically evil acts surrender the human person's inviolable rights, without whose recognition there can be no decent society.

Finally, toward the end of chapter three, Pope John Paul answers the argument that it is too much to ask people to live in accord with absolute moral norms — an argument often implicit in dissenting moralists' touching descriptions of the hardships experienced by individuals and couples required to abstain from sexual satisfaction, by women burdened with unwanted pregnancies, and by divorced individuals deprived of marital happiness. The answer is that the moral requirements of God's law are not excessive: "Temptations can be overcome, sins can be avoided, because together with the commandments the Lord gives us the possibility of keeping them" (102). The Pope then shows that the argument based on human weakness is incompatible with Catholic faith by repeating the Council of Trent's solemn condemnation of the view "that the commandments of God are impossible of observance by one who is justified" (102, quoting DS 1536; cf. DS 1568).

Most dissenting theologians claim that they really do not diverge greatly from traditional teaching — that they approve of exceptions only in "conflict cases" or





very unusual circumstances. Predictably, however, as their opinions were handed down in religious education programs and applied in pastoral practice, many Catholics replaced traditional morality with contemporary permissiveness. Millions of babies are dead, millions of marriages wrecked; tens of thousands of religious and priestly vocations are nipped in the bud or ruined; some priests' and bishops' personal misbehavior wounds the Church.

Is anyone really happier? At the end of his encyclical, the Pope replies, characterizing dissenting moralists as "those who claim to love [sinful man] by justifying his sin," and concludes: "No absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy; only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life" (120).

The initial reactions of dissenting theologians and journalists friendly to them indicate the two main lines which criticism of the encyclical will take. The first

is that the views of dissenting theologians have been oversimplified, that theories which they do not even hold have been attributed to them, and that the encyclical overlooks various important distinctions which were always taken for granted even by the moralists who wrote the textbooks that were used in seminaries before Vatican II.

I regret to say that some statements in the encyclical are vulnerable to such criticisms. It sometimes misstates the views and arguments of dissenting moralists, and occasionally overlooks a distinction when dealing with moral norms. Furthermore, its arguments are not always complete and well ordered; its formulations seldom are sharply chiseled; and its writing is never economical, so that repetitions abound, offering for every major point a variety of loosely worded statements, among which critics will delight in selecting the most vulnerable.

These defects in the encyclical, however, by no means make it miss its main target: the various attempts to circumvent the constant and most firm teaching of the Church excluding certain kinds of acts as always wrong. Nor, as I will show shortly, does the first line of criticism of the encyclical touch its most telling theological argument.

The second line of criticism developed in early reactions to the encyclical is that it has missed the crucial, ecclesiological point which dissenting theologians have been making since the publication of *Humanae vitae* twenty-five years ago, namely, that dissent from noninfallible teachings can be permissible and even appropriate. Bolstering this line of criticism are the correct observations that *Veritatis splendor* says little about the authority of the magisterium's moral teaching, and nothing about its infallibility. Indeed, it

has been claimed that a draft of the encyclical characterizing the disputed norms as infallible was being prepared for publication in 1990 but was stopped in the fall of that year and scrapped in the spring of 1991, because many European theologians protested against the content of the leaked text, and the Pope realized that he could not go so far.

### Earlier document complements *VS*

I am not in a position to falsify that story, though I doubt its truth. Even if the sequence of events is correct, however, this argument, like most arguments from silence, is very weak. For, in the first place, while this encyclical was being prepared, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published, in May 1990, an "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," entitled *Donum veritatis*, which dealt at length with ecclesiological issues, including infallibility. *Veritatis splendor* incorporates some brief sections of the 1990 document, and I suggest that the whole of it ought to be regarded as a prelude and complement to the encyclical.

What is far more important, however, is that Pope John Paul by no means has missed the point about the possible acceptability of dissent from noninfallible moral teachings. For, while he does not focus on infallibility in *Veritatis splendor*, he frames his whole argument in terms of the proper object of infallibility, namely, revelation. A key passage is in the introduction to chapter two:

... within the context of the theological debates which followed the Council, there have developed *certain interpretations of Christian morality which are not consistent with "sound teaching"* (2 Tm 4:3). Certainly the Church's magisterium does not intend to impose on the

faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one. Nevertheless, in order to "reverently preserve and faithfully expound" the word of God (cf. DV 10), the magisterium has the duty to state that some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations are incompatible with revealed truth. (29).

The phrase, "reverently preserve and faithfully expound" implicitly asserts that the encyclical's rejection of dissenting views as incompatible with revealed truth pertains at least to the secondary object of infallibility.

### Jesus allows no exceptions

Moreover, the Pope everywhere points out that the disputed norms pertain to divine revelation. This is clear from the summary I have given of the encyclical's main arguments. In particular, in treating Jesus' teaching on the Decalogue, the Pope makes a remarkable assertion, already quoted above: "Jesus himself reaffirms that these prohibitions allow no exceptions: 'If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. . . . You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery'" (52).

No doubt, dissenting moralists and their friends expert in Scripture scholarship will point out that nowhere does the text of the Gospels explicitly say that Jesus excluded all exceptions to the commandments. However, Vatican II, while setting aside the idea that Scripture and tradition are two separate sources from which divine revelation flows to us, taught that "sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written," so that "the living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith" (DV 12).

Reading Scripture in this way, one cannot ignore the fact that, until recent times, when some Jewish and Christian theologians began denying that there are intrinsically evil acts, no Jew or Christian ever imagined that “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery” mean that one may not kill the innocent without a proportionate reason or engage in extramarital intercourse unless doing so will promote the “creative growth toward integration” of those involved. Thus, any attempt to interpret the commandments as allowing exceptions entails that through all the centuries until our own the moral truth which God meant to communicate was radically misunderstood—that God failed to communicate effectively. God, however, cannot have failed to communicate effectively.

Moreover, if the view that the commandments admit exceptions were correct, the whole body of believers would have been mistaken until almost today. But ever since Pentecost it has been true that the Holy Spirit is permanently present in the Church, so that “the universal body of the faithful . . . cannot be mistaken in belief . . . in matters of faith and morals” (109, quoting *Lumen gentium*, 12).

Consequently, the Pope’s interpretation of Scripture as affirming exceptionless moral norms should be accepted as sound, and the dissenting views which *Veritatis splendor* rejects should be recognized as incompatible with Catholic faith.

#### **A step toward definitive judgment**

If the theologians who have been dissenting from Catholic moral teaching are honest with themselves, they will have to admit that now they have only three

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choices: to admit that they have been mistaken, to admit that they do not believe God’s word, or to claim that Pope John Paul is grossly misinterpreting the Bible. No doubt, most of those who honestly confront the encyclical’s challenge will choose the third alternative. That will greatly escalate the conflict which has been going on in the Catholic Church during the past thirty years. The ongoing argument as to what God has revealed about certain necessary conditions for entering his Kingdom is undeniably over essentials. It cannot long go unresolved. It cannot be settled by theologians. Only the magisterium’s definitive judgment can settle it, and *Veritatis splendor* takes a long step toward that definitive judgment. ■