

THE VATICAN on VERITATIS SPLENDOR

Veritatis Splendor

6 August 1993

Feast of the Transfiguration

Purpose of the Encyclical

In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II treats certain fundamental aspects of Catholic moral doctrine. The pope had already announced his intention to write such an encyclical in the apostolic letter *Spiritus Domini* (August 1, 1987), issued on the second centenary of the death of St. Alphonsus Liguori, patron of confessors and moralists.

After lengthy preparation, the encyclical is being published only now because the pope thought it best that it be preceded by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which contains a complete and systematic presentation of Christian moral teaching. Pointing to the catechism as a “sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine,” the encyclical is able to limit itself to dealing with certain fundamental questions regarding the Church’s moral teaching, in the form of a discernment made by the Church’s Magisterium with regard to certain controversial problems of present-day moral theology.

Those the Encyclical Addresses

The pope has addressed the encyclical specifically to the bishops. As those who share with the successor of Peter, and under his primatial authority, the responsibility of preserving “sound teaching” (2 Tim. 4:3), bishops must be vigilant that the word of God to be believed and lived is faithfully taught.

This is part of the mandate originally given by Jesus to the apostles (Matt. 28:16-20), and it is one which must be constantly taken up anew, in the power of the Holy Spirit, for the promotion of ecclesial communion and evangelization as well as for that dialogue about the truth and the good which the Church seeks to carry on with all individuals and peoples.

The Reasons for This Encyclical

Stimulated by the papal Magisterium of the last two centuries, the Church has continued to develop her rich tradition of moral reflection on many different spheres of human life. That heritage is now confronted by the challenge of a new situation in society and in the Christian community itself. Alongside praiseworthy attempts at the renewal of moral theology in accordance with the wishes of the Second Vatican Council, doubts and various objections with regard to the Church’s moral teaching have arisen, even within Catholic moral theology.

It has become increasingly evident that this is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent from certain specific moral norms, but rather a general and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine as such, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical concepts.

Specifically, in certain currents of theology, the traditional doctrine with regard to the natural law and the universality and the permanent validity of its precepts has been rejected. It is called into question whether the Magisterium is competent to intervene in matters of morality and to teach authoritatively the binding requirements of God’s commandments. Moreover, it is maintained that one can love God and neighbor without being obliged always and everywhere, in all situations, by the commandments taught by the Church. Doubt is raised about the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality, to the extent of theorizing the possibility of forms of pluralism which are in fact incompatible with ecclesial communion. As these ideas become more widespread, no one can fail to see that they have extremely important repercussions for the Church, for the life of the faithful and for human coexistence itself. The pastoral and social problems which have emerged on every level make it possible to speak of a genuine crisis. For this reason the papal Magisterium has deemed it necessary to clarify the points of doctrine crucial for the successful resolution of this crisis.

Heart of the Problem

At the root of the dissent mentioned above, and of solutions which are at odds with Catholic doctrine, is the influence of currents of thought which ultimately separate the exercise of human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship with truth. An extreme notion of the autonomy of freedom tends to make freedom into an absolute, a source of values, apart from any dependence on truth.

Certainly it must be acknowledged that such extreme positions are not found in Catholic theology. It must also be acknowledged that, in developing a more personalistic approach, Catholic theology has come to a renewed appreciation of the best of the classical doctrinal tradition regarding the value of personal responsibility and the role of reason and conscience in establishing moral obligation. Nevertheless, in certain instances, there has been a radical rethinking of the mutual roles of faith and reason in identifying moral norms which refer to specific “inner-worldly” kinds of behavior. There has been a tendency to assign to autonomous reason (quite apart from revelation, tradition and the Magisterium, and even from an antecedent truth) the task of creatively establishing norms relative to the “human good.”

Even more radically, the acceptance of a certain concept of autonomy has called into question the intrinsic connection between faith and morality. Faith, it must be said, is not merely an intellectual assent to certain abstract truths; it also possesses a moral content. Faith gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment; it entails and brings to perfection the keeping of the commandments. “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

Christ, the Light of the Nations

In view of these problems and the urgent need of a discernment aimed at safeguarding the deposit of Catholic doctrine, the pope turns to Jesus Christ, the “light of the nations” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). Christ has shown us the way of authentic freedom: “The truth will make you free” (John 8:32). He himself has told us: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Contrary to all those distortions and misrepresentations which under the guise of exalting freedom actually empty it of meaning, authentic freedom is only discovered in relation to the truth, to that truth which was present “in the beginning” and shines forth in all its splendor (“*veritatis splendor*”) on the face of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 3:5-18).

The purpose of this encyclical, then, is not merely or even principally to warn against errors, so much as to proclaim anew, in all its power, the message of Christian freedom. At the heart of this message is the conviction that only in the truth does man’s freedom become truly human and responsible. But the encyclical also desires to speak to all people of good will, so that in the present moment of history it can shed the light of faith on the path of freedom toward the good, the road to an authentically good human life in its personal and social dimensions.

Contents of the Encyclical

The encyclical is divided into three parts. It begins with a biblical meditation on the dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man (Matt. 19:16-22); this helps to bring out the essential elements of Christian morality. Then, in the middle chapter, which is doctrinal in nature, it proceeds to make a critical discernment of certain trends in contemporary moral theology, in the light of sacred Scripture and the Church’s living tradition, with particular reference to the Second Vatican Council. Finally, in the third chapter, which is pastoral in nature, it points out the relevance of Catholic teaching on the moral good for the life of the Church and of the world.

Gospel Meditation on Dialogue of Jesus With Rich Young Man

The question asked of Jesus by the rich young man is a question present in the heart of everyone: “Teacher, what good must I do to have life?” At the deepest level the question about good and evil is also about the meaning of life and about happiness. The Church was willed by Christ precisely for this purpose: so that people in every age might come to know him and discover in him the only answer fully capable of satisfying all their questions about life.

Jesus' response to the young man concisely expresses the very heart and spirit of Christian morality, bringing out the essential elements of Old and New Testament revelation with regard to moral action: first, the subordination of human action to God, to the one who "alone is good"; second, the close relationship between the moral good of human actions and eternal life, since the commandments of God, which Jesus confirms and takes up into the new law of love, are the path of life; third, the way of perfection, which consists in a readiness to leave everything in order to follow Jesus in imitation of his own gift of self to God the Father and to his brothers and sisters in service and in love. Christian morality is thus revealed as the complete fulfillment of the law, made possible by the free gift of the Holy Spirit, the source and means of the moral life of the "new creation." The Church's living tradition, which includes her Magisterium, her growing doctrinal understanding, her liturgy and the lived holiness of her members, has always preserved the harmony between faith and life. In particular, the Magisterium of the Church's pastors, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has developed an authoritative interpretation of the law of the Lord over many centuries and amid changing historical situations.

Critical Discernment of Certain Trends in Theology

As part of this ongoing task, the pope undertakes a critical discernment of certain trends in contemporary moral theology.

First of all, he reaffirms the constitutive relationship between freedom and truth. Genuine moral autonomy, as understood by Catholic doctrine, means that human freedom and God's law meet each other and intersect. Indeed, the "natural" law, the participation of God's eternal law in the rational creature, implies that reason and the moral precepts which derive from it are essentially subordinated to divine wisdom. In opposition to every kind of relativism, it must be affirmed that the precepts of the moral law possess a universal and permanent character. They express the original truth about the good of the person, indicating the path which leads to the authentic realization of freedom. These precepts are ultimately grounded in Jesus Christ, who is always the same, yesterday and today and forever (cf. Heb.13:8; *Gaudium et Spes*, 10).

Following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16), the moral conscience is treated as "man's sanctuary," in which there echoes the voice of God, who always calls us to love and to do good and avoid evil. Nevertheless, in opposition to all subjectivism, it is reaffirmed that conscience is not a tribunal which creates the good; conscience itself must be formed in the light of truth. The final judgment of conscience must be enlightened by the divine law, the universal and objective norm of morality.

While acknowledging that there are certain choices in life which are fundamental, particularly the choice of faith, the encyclical rejects any separation between a "fundamental option" of a transcendental character and the deliberate choices of concrete acts. The fundamental choice which characterizes and sustains the Christian's moral life is revoked every time the person uses his freedom in conscious and free choices contrary to that fundamental choice, where morally grave matter is concerned (mortal sin).

In opposition to the moral theories called teleologism, consequentialism and proportionalism, the encyclical states that the moral evaluation of human acts is not drawn solely from the weighing of their foreseeable consequences or from the proportion of "pre-moral" goods or evils resulting from them. Even a good intention is not enough to justify the goodness of a choice. The morality of an act, while certainly taking into account both its subjective intention and consequences, depends primarily on the object of the choice which reason grasps and proposes to the will.

Consequently it is affirmed that it is possible to hold as "intrinsically evil" certain kinds of behavior opposed to the truth and the good of the person. The choice by which they are made can never be good, even if that choice is made with a subjectively good intention and with a view to positive consequences. It is not licit, even for the most grave reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom. 3:8; *Humanae Vitae*, 14). There thus exist "negative" moral precepts (precepts, in other words, forbidding certain kinds of behavior), which have universal value and are valid without exception.

Moral Good for the Life of the Church and the World

By looking always to the Lord Jesus, the Church comes to discover the authentic meaning of freedom: the gift of self, inspired by love, for the sake of serving God and one's brothers and sisters. It discovers that God's law expresses, in the commandments and in their absoluteness, the demands of love. Universal and unchanging moral norms are at the service of the person and of society. The profound renewal of social and political life, which is increasingly desired by people today, can only occur if freedom is once more linked to truth. Ethical relativism, despite its appearances, inevitably leads to a totalitarianism which denies the truth about man. To promote morality is to promote man and his freedom, but this can never take place in opposition to the truth and in opposition to God.

In the history of salvation, the martyrs, by preferring death to sin, have borne witness to the inviolable holiness of God's law and the unconditional respect which is due to the requirements of the dignity of each person. In bearing this witness Christians are not alone: They are supported by the moral sense present in peoples and by the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West.

The concrete possibilities of acting according to moral truth, despite the weakness of human freedom caused by sin, are entirely found in the mystery of Christ's redemption. In Christ, God the Father offers us not only the truth about the good (the commandment of love, which sums up in itself the Ten Commandments), but also that "new law," which is his Spirit within us, and his grace, which enables us to love and to do good. In Christ we encounter the mercy of God, who understands our human weakness yet never falsifies the standard of good and evil by accepting compromises which would adapt it to particular situations.

For this reason, the preaching of Christian morality, so closely linked to the new evangelization, must heed the warning of the apostle Paul: "that the cross of Christ not be emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17). In the task of proclaiming in all their fullness the justice and mercy which shine forth from the cross, the ministry of moral theologians is crucial; they perform a genuine ecclesial service, in communion with the bishops. Bishops themselves have the task of being vigilant that the word of God is faithfully proclaimed and applied to life, whether in preaching addressed to the faithful, in efforts at evangelization, in teaching imparted in seminaries and faculties of theology, and in the practices of Catholic institutions.

Appeal to Mary, Mother of Mercy

At the conclusion of his encyclical, the Holy Father turns to Mary, mother of mercy and model of true Christian freedom. He prays that through her intercession the truth of her son will shine forth in the moral life of the faithful, "for the glory of God." The pope recalls, in this final section, the "extraordinary simplicity" of Christian morality, which consists in "following Christ," letting oneself be transformed by his grace and renewed by his mercy, which comes to us in the communion of his Church.