

THE SPIRIT OF *VERITATIS SPLENDOR*

In the months prior to the publication of John Paul II's Encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, all sorts of rumors could be heard about its spirit and emphasis. Everyone knew, of course, that this Encyclical would be of direct and fundamental importance to everyday life and to the understanding of morals. Many frankly wanted to see the Church finally accept the now legalized habits of so much modern culture. Others wanted to know what the Church itself thought of basic moral issues, so much confusion has been generated about them by theologians and professors. The Encyclical was predicted to be "stern" or "intransigent" or "blunt" or even "reactionary."

On reading this first formal treatment on moral theology by the Holy See (#115), however, I have quite a different impression about it. *Veritatis Splendor*, is, like all the works of Pope Wojtyła, calm and magisterial. The new Encyclical recalls the very first words he spoke in St. Peter's Square as Pope (October 22, 1978): "Do not be afraid, but open and calm." John Paul II is almost the only figure in public life today who bears in his very person, as he did again in Denver in August or Lithuania in September, this serene and confident face before what are admittedly widespread moral crises and intellectual confusions over how we should live.

This courageous man has understood his duty to speak the truth both to bishops who seem, to many, to be weak and to a world that stubbornly sets its ways against what is right. But even more, John Paul II has sensed the "splendor," the excitement of this same truth. What is most disconcerting about *Veritatis Splendor* is its inner coherence and lucid logic, its vibrant appeal to truth itself, to the truth of things, to the truth of human things.

This Encyclical, read in conjunction with the *General Catechism of the Catholic Church* forbids any honest man any longer, to doubt exactly what the Church holds on a particular issue. It becomes ever clearer if we take all the work of John Paul II together that he has systematically addressed every theological, scientific, political, philosophical, and even literary aspect of the faith in the light of the best thought of our era, indeed of any era. The Church of John Paul II is neither out of date or behind the times, but luminously clear on what it believes in the light of what modern men think and do. Again and again John Paul II has shown that, of all the available theories or systems, this faith and reason that he represents and articulates so well are the only ones that make complete sense of God, man, and the world.

Many of us, no doubt, have been perplexed by the depressing and deviant voices often heard from within the theological ranks of the Church itself. "The increasing radical rejection of the teaching authority of the Pope..." the Archbishop of Denver has observed (August 12, 1993), has been a great tragedy for the Church in the United States.... Indeed, what can reasonably be called a deep-seated, anti-Roman bias in some parts of the Church requires all of us to reflect carefully on the profound, fruitful mysteries of communion, fidelity, and obedience ... in the Church.

We have listened to and heard praised by the media and academia the too many advocates who have espoused as necessary or as "catholic" precisely those positions that the Holy Father has finally identified, evaluated, and found wanting in relation to the central teaching of the Church. Such teaching neither the Pope nor the Church made up by itself, but were received to be handed down in tact from generation to generation even to the consummation of the world.

Vatican II was said to have affirmed the good things of the modern world. *Veritatis Splendor* recognizes that, whether it likes to or not, the Church must also underscore in a concrete way just

what is wrong in this same modern world and why, particularly concerning those issues that directly relate to salvation, as the ordinary living of every human life does in most of our daily deeds.

One of the finest legacies of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, found again in *Veritatis Splendor*, is to spell out carefully and clearly just what is held by those philosophies or ideologies that reject one or other basic moral teaching of the Christian tradition. The main service to truth carried out by the Magisterium is to state and define what is not Catholic, what is not in accord with the tradition. The faithful, cleric and lay, have a right to know exactly what is opposed to Christian teaching and practice, particularly when this is being presented in the name or practice of Christian teaching and living.

No doubt, John Paul II put the whole of his considerable energy and acumen into this moving document. Moral theology is, after all, one of the academic fields to which he has devoted much of his intellectual attention. He has in fact, even by secular standards, few intellectual peers, something his critics reluctantly acknowledge. We find in *Veritatis Splendor* references to his own "acting person", as well as to his earlier documents such as *Redemptor Hominis*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Spiritus Domini*, and *Centesimus Annus*. The Documents of Vatican II are constantly present. So is the *new General Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Humanae Vitae* are there, along with so many previous Popes, theologians, and Councils from all generations of the Church.

The Holy Father has located himself, as we would expect, exactly within the central tradition of the Catholic Church. He is aware that many people are wondering whether the Church still teaches in all areas, especially in ethics and morals, what was handed down to it from the beginning. No one can deny that people are confused often by their own pastors. The Holy Father also knows that there is tremendous public and private opposition, even at times hatred, to everything the faith

teaches and stands for. In the words of Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, "If anyone believes that, after Vatican II, there are no more wolves, he is badly mistaken in his understanding of Christian faith and of the Council."¹

While remaining calm and peaceful, the Pope understands that the Gates of Hell must be involved in the kinds of corrupt and evil things that men do to themselves and to one another in the modern world. Actions and teachings directly contrary to what he has set forth here are common and habitual. Much to its annoyance, the Pope has persisted in worrying about the declining moral levels in particularly Western and developed societies. What good the Church teaches about human life, action, and destiny is denied both in theory and practice. "Today's widespread tendencies toward subjectivism, utilitarianism and relativism appear not merely as pragmatic attitudes or patterns of behaviour, but rather as approaches having basis in theory and claiming full cultural and social legitimacy" (#106).

What is no doubt most striking in *Veritatis Splendor* is the constant reference to St. Thomas and the natural law, not forgetting, as St. Thomas himself did not, St. Augustine who always puts things of truth so graphically and so personally. Some concern had been expressed in recent years that John Paul II was overly cautious in using natural law terminology for fear that it would be confused, as it easily can be, with modern language about scientific "laws". But here there is a straight-forward recognition of the centrality of St. Thomas and natural law in any adequate discussion of human ends and human actions related to them. The Pope, following St. Thomas, carefully and clearly states just what he means by natural law and all its ramifications.

¹Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Realization of Vatican II," *Catholic World Report*, 3 (October, 1993), 56.

What I want to do here is to say something of what I take to be the "spirit" of this doctrinal instruction, directed as it is to both our minds and hearts. The Pope recognizes that the men of our time in some sense long to know the truth about themselves, the "whole truth about man," as he often puts it.² But he also recognizes that there is a "counter-truth" that seeks, with considerable success, to replace the Christian understanding of man and things with an autonomous intellect responsible to nothing but itself. Neither nature, nor God, nor tradition is said, in such a theory, to indicate any limit or order for what men can and cannot do, of what man is or is not.

This philosophy of absolute autonomy takes several forms. It is found within many moral theologians themselves in the form of consequentialism, proportionalism, teleologism, and the other intellectual efforts specifically noted in this document. Indeed, it might be said, unfortunately without too much exaggeration, to be the dominant form of intellectual tendency that has been found in Catholic universities and many seminaries in recent decades. This fact of this situation is why the Holy Father charges local bishops to judge these matters for themselves in the light of this Encyclical (#116).

The Holy Father makes this charge of responsibility to the bishops about universities and institutions that call themselves "Catholic", be it noted, because the faithful and the world itself have a right to know and hear not what these theories are but what the Church teaches. Invariably, these systems seek to shift the meaning of the Christian presence in the world so that it can accommodate itself to those very movements and practices that are obviously contrary to the traditional

²*The Whole Truth about Man: John Paul II to University Students and Faculties*, Edited by James V. Schall (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981).

understanding of Christianity. If this condition remains unaddressed, it means that we have the greatest difficulty in finding out what the Church really teaches even from its professed teachers.

What is most under attack is the idea that there are universal principles of morality that cannot be violated, principles that hold in all circumstances. These principles indicate the good for individuals and societies. They have a direct relation to one's own salvation. What is further denied in practice is the place of the Church's or of the Pope's own authority in addressing himself directly to these issues in terms of truth, a truth that is in fact binding on everyone. In his discussion of the commandments, of natural law, and of conscience, the Pope restates the essence of the Catholic position which is essentially that the distinction of good and evil is from God, is manifested in the moral life of man, and is capable of being understood by the rational creature. The distinction of good and evil is not primarily derived from the will's own decisions about what it does to fulfill itself or society. This good is not to be achieved through the use of means and actions contrary to the norms found in the commandments.

The Encyclical begins, surprisingly, with a long meditation on the story of the Rich Young Man who asks Christ what "good" he must do to be saved, to obtain everlasting life? The very context of the question, be it noted, serves to join in a coherent whole the Old Testament with the New and both with genuine philosophic reasoning about right and wrong human conduct. Obviously, this account of the Rich Young Man is a favorite passage of John Paul II, but it is also one that combines reason and revelation in a single dialogue in a most graphic manner.

Christ tells the Young Man simply to "keep the commandments." The Young Man replies that he has "kept them from his youth". The Pope notes how difficult this keeping is for anyone. He does not deny the truth of what the Young Man says. This answer also implies something mysterious about even the good, namely that it is always leading us somewhere, higher. Then Christ

tells the young man what he must do to be "perfect". He must sell what he has, give to the poor, and follow Him. The Young Man goes away "sad" for he has many possessions. The Apostles at this point wonder who can be saved. Christ tells them that the teaching is difficult but that all things are possible for God. We are not, in other words, justified in going away sad. We are being given guidance to our deepest yearnings that somehow take place in the most profound manner after we have entered the path of goodness. The greatest adventures begin after we decide to be good, not before -- one hundredfold in this life and life eternal in the next.

One might ask whether this introduction of the Pope is appropriate for our time and for this topic? About a month before the Encyclical appeared, when I had no idea how the Holy Father would approach it, I had a call from a former student. He told me that for personal reasons he was studying religion. He explained that he was formerly a Catholic but now a Methodist. What he wanted to know from me, however, was "whether the Catholic Church still holds the Ten Commandments"?

Needless to say, I was taken aback at this remarkable question, especially as we had said something about the commandments in the very class of mine the young man attended. In any case, I assured the young man that the Church did still teach the commandments. He replied, "Well, I went to your university for four years, took the required theology courses, went to Church on Sundays for many years both in the Catholic and Methodist churches but no one ever once mentioned the Ten Commandments." One suspects that this experience is not untypical.

When I read the Holy Father's reflection on the Rich Young man, his emphasis on keeping the commandments, I realized that what John Paul II was saying was directed to the hearts of such young men who have not heard in their courses and churches anything about the commandments, let alone about whether they kept them or whether they should sell what they have and seek to be

"perfect". John Paul II has an uncanny way of seeing into the souls of the young men and women of our era, souls starving for what he is explaining, yet souls who find it almost impossible in their churches and universities and schools to discover what he is actually saying. There is, I think, no substitute for reading the Holy Father's words themselves. *Veritatis Splendor* and the *Le Catéchisme de la Eglise Catholique* -- it still is not out yet in accurate English, another intellectual scandal -- may have to be discovered by most of us in private over the heads of our churches and schools.

The key word, that appears again and again in this reflection of the Pope, is *good*. What *good* must I do to be saved? To explain the origin of this good and its content is central to the intellectual argument of this Encyclical. This *good* is not subjective, not something that is constituted by the wills of individuals, whatever they might choose in their sincerity or self-interest. It is an objective good that calls for judgment of truth and appeals to our freedom, but never denies it. It is a good that inheres in our being because its meaning and truth are from the cause of human existence in the first place and built into the very structure of finite being itself.

Hence, we are rational beings who must discover a truth about ourselves and our actions, a truth that we did not ourselves constitute. We still, no doubt, may choose not to follow this truth. Even when whole societies or classes make such choices against the truth, they remain wrong and their choices bear bitter fruit.

The doctrine of forgiveness, a central aspect of Christianity, is not designed to change this situation but to remedy the consequences of evil choices that are put into the world by human freedom. Forgiveness affirms and acknowledges the objective disorder of evil, while the modern moral theories that the Holy Father objected to seek, in one way or another, to make the disorders themselves to be good, to be the norms of our actions. This effort to neutralize objective evil

underscores the seriousness of the problem that the Holy Father addresses in this Encyclical. His is nothing less than a defense of reason and revelation.

Most people recall this incident of the Rich Young Man in *Matthew* to be the classical location for the distinction between precepts and counsels. That is, there are things that we all must do to be saved, precepts such as observing the commandments, but that there are more sacrificial and demanding paths to follow the Lord if we are called and choose them. Surprisingly, little of this tradition is found in this meditation, though it is not the intention of the Holy Father here to mitigate the worth of religious life in the Church, the life of the vows.

Rather, the Pope applies the questions of the Rich Young Man about "what good" must we do to be saved to everyone, to rich and poor, to laity and clergy, to male and female. Everyone must both keep the commandments and, in addition, do those further things that reach to the spirit of love behind them. Different ways of life and service remain, to be sure, but essentially everyone is destined to the same end of final presence before the Triune God. And the way to reach this end involves grace, involves doing the good and avoiding the evil that is implicit in the commandments.

A second theme that immediately struck me about this Encyclical was the emphasis on martyrdom. The Pope was concerned not merely about those unsettlingly many people who are still martyred in our time but about all the martyrs in the history of the Church. Why would the Pope, we might ask ourselves, make such a definite point about martyrs? What is at issue here? I think the question goes to the heart of the Encyclical. Put in its most direct form, the fact of martyrs means that there was and is something worth dying for, the good itself, very often seen in a principle of truth or in a doctrine of faith or in a refusal to do something evil.

The false moral theories that the Holy Father analyzes in this Encyclical, when lived out, in effect make martyrdom unlikely or unnecessary. They leave no absolute standard or principle of

right and wrong that would require that one had to die rather than give in. These theories trivialize the seriousness of the faith, in other words. The emphasis on martyrdom in this Encyclical was the Pope's way of reaffirming the validity and nobility of the lives of all the Christian martyrs who saw that their faith demanded that they acknowledge the reality of evil.

The Scottish martyr, St. John Ogilvie, for example, as we read in his Letter from Glasgow on 15 October 1614, "confessed that he was one of the Ordinary Jesuits, and, being asked whether the Pope's jurisdiction extended over the King's dominions in spiritual matters, affirmed constantly the same, and would die for it." Clearly, if the Pope's spiritual authority and what it stands for are not something central, not something worth dying for, John Ogilvie's martyrdom was silly.

It is precisely this authority and what it signifies that is at stake in this Encyclical. This authority is what is charged with keeping alive the rightness of our thoughts and actions about the essential content and nature of good and evil. Perhaps also this emphasis on martyrdom was the Pope's way of preparing us for a future in which the hostility to truth takes a much more virulent form than it has in most of our societies. Signs of this hostility are already becoming much more evident.

Far from giving us a new and more detailed list of sins, however, the Holy Father in this Encyclical does little more, in one sense, than to repeat the Ten Commandments and the admonitions of St. Paul about what wrongs we can do -- murder, adultery, stealing, lying, cheating, abusing, abortions, sexually deviant acts, hatred, and, yes, contraception. Yet, since some of these aberrations are precisely the deeds and actions that are being justified by the theories the Holy Father discussed, ones often promoted and legalized in our societies and promoted even in certain areas of the Church, his reaffirmation of the commandments is radical in the extreme. The Pope cites these acts, however, as examples of things fundamentally wrong in themselves, of things not to be done under

any circumstances. In doing this, he does no more than did Christ Himself, Paul, and the whole orthodox tradition of Christianity. How can we be astonished that he did what he is obliged to do?

When we hear these sins singled out by religious authorities -- if indeed we do hear them from them any more -- we are tempted to take them negatively as if we are being pressured into doing something we really do not want to do. The Pope recognizes here the very drama of the Temptation in the Garden of Eden, that we are reluctant to find the truth in sources other than ourselves. On the other hand, we are given here the gift of explanation and of grace when someone carefully details the logic of truth in our actions as the Holy Father does. His perceptive analysis of the contemporary arguments for changing the basics of morality suddenly illuminates the subtlety of the disorder we are living in. This is why he is so careful to associate the truth with light, with the splendor of seeing and understanding the truth because we can understand the very arguments that would have us miss truth itself.

Veritatis Splendor is not primarily a political or social treatise, but there are interesting references to democracy and its relation to the kinds of ethical life that concerns the Pope. Throughout his career, the Holy Father has recognized that the state of one's soul is what is most immediately under our control. We are made for eternal salvation no matter what sort of regime we live in. We are not necessarily less close to God if we live in the worst regime.

Thus, to reform society is first to reform ourselves. This is why evangelization and missionary activity begin with each person's own interior life. We are used to hearing theories that seek to reform the world by first reforming institutions, not that there are not good and bad institutions. But evil can happen in good institutions and good in bad ones because the location of good and evil is in the human will, not in institutions.

In one of the most ringing and graphic statements of the equality of all men before God, John Paul II wrote: "When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the 'poorest of the poor' on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal" (#96). In much religious social thought, there is a tendency to denigrate the dignity of the poor by blaming most of their faults on others, on structures and exploitation or maldistribution of goods.

What bothers people in affluent societies like our own about both the Pope and Solzhenitsyn is their refusal to say that our democratic systems are morally in good shape. In his Lecture to the National Arts Club (New York, February, 1993), Solzhenitsyn observed:

World culture today is in a crisis of great severity.... Nothing worthy can be built on a neglect of higher meaning and on a relativistic view of concepts and culture as a whole. ... Looking intently, we can see that behind these ubiquitous and seemingly innocent experiments rejecting "antiquated~ tradition there lies a deep-seated hostility toward any spirituality.

This relativism and hostility is what John Paul II has also found in developed societies. He sees it as a danger of the greatest moment, one unacknowledged and unadmitted. Indeed, the Holy Father sees that the danger of a new sort of totalitarianism is very real.

"Today, when many countries have seen the fall of ideologies which bound politics to a totalitarian conception of the world -- Marxism being the foremost of these," John Paul II wrote, there is no less grave a danger that the fundamental rights of the human person will be denied and that the religious yearning which arise in the heart of every human being will be absorbed once again into politics. This is *the risk of an alliance between*

democracy and ethical relativism, which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life, and on a deeper level make the acknowledgement of truth impossible (#101).

He then cites *Centesimus Annus* (#46) to the effect that "a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism."

Surely this is the fundamental issue that is behind all our discussions about current politics and the theories behind them in the United States and other countries. We have succeeded in theoretically and legally legitimized almost every aberration that have been defined in our moral tradition. We describe this movement as progress and liberation. Classical political theory, to use Christopher Dawson's powerful phrase, has recognized that there is a "judgment of the nations" that refuses to acknowledge whatever is done as good simply because it is willed and done. The objective evil that the Holy Father was so clear about remains to carry out its own laws and consequences. The moral order can be a fragile order because we must choose to acknowledge its truth and live it in our lives and laws.

Someone asked me, in conclusion, what I thought of the opposition within the Church to this Encyclical. The moral ideologies that the Holy Father singled out have been pervasive in the circles I know and live in. Underestimating his moral courage, I know, few thought that the Holy Father would go ahead and be Pope, as they would not have were they in his shoes. They underestimated their man, of course.

But I remarked, that if I had been teaching and advising opinions and actions for the last quarter of a century substantially at variance with the teachings found in this Encyclical, I would be very sobered if I had the least sense of Christian obedience. I would be left with only two choices: either to repent, acknowledge the damage I had been doing, and rethink my whole position or to

continue to follow the philosophic and moral culture of the world, and hate the good that the Pope has now affirmed.

The Pope's exhortation to the bishops and the theologians in this Encyclical (#109-16) is an edifying one, a charitable one. But it is not at the cost of the truth that is the good. The Pope has made sure that an objective order of things, of human life and its good, would remain present in our democratic world that wants to believe that nothing else exists but our own autonomous wills. What else exists is the natural law, the Law of God, the City of God, the destiny that will be ours not on the basis of our autonomous wills but on the basis of our wills choosing to act on what is true, on what is the truth of things.