

The Novelty of the Faith as an Interpretive and Operative Criterion for Moral Life Existence*

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1 Faith and Morality According to the Encyclical “Veritatis Splendor”

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* considers the loss of the essential and constitutive relationship between freedom and truth as the basis of the grave moral problems that are examined at length within its pages.¹ The loss of this link depends, in turn, on “another more serious and destructive dichotomy, that which separates faith from morality.”² In the contemporary process of secularization, that dichotomy is sometimes introduced in the attitudes and behavior of the faithful, “whose faith is weakened and loses its character as a new and original criterion for thinking and acting in personal, family and social life,”³ going so far as to adopt judgment criteria which are

*Translated by Tom and Kira Howes.

¹ Cf. John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis Splendor*, 6-VIII-1993, no. 4. The Latin text can be found in AAS 85 (1983) pp. 1133-1228. The English translation used here is taken directly from the Vatican website. Hereafter cited as VS.

² VS, no. 88.

³ VS, no. 88.

foreign, or even adverse, to those of the Gospel.⁴ We are therefore faced with a problem of the utmost importance, which is currently one of the most acute pastoral concerns of the Church.⁵

On the plane of moral theology the problem that we just mentioned is very complex. The encyclical affirms that the Christian faith is “a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a *truth to be lived out*.”⁶ Thus, it must be admitted that “faith also possesses a moral content.”⁷ However, if we think the position of *Veritatis Splendor* remains sufficiently gathered in these assertions, we would be taking it far too lightly. John Paul II travels a much more elaborate path—a path whose difficulty is reflected in the problems that a simultaneous and harmonious reading of the first two chapters of the encyclical poses to specialists. Some authors focus their attention on the Christological approach of the first chapter, almost leaving aside the second; others, by contrast, emphasize the rational structure offered by the second chapter, considering the first as a beautiful hortatory meditation.⁸

Personally, I am convinced that the only way to do justice to *Veritatis Splendor* is to give equal attention and importance to both chapters. In effect, the encyclical clearly makes manifest the double reference necessary for understanding the epistemological status of moral theology. This is a knowledge that, on the one hand, “accepts and examines Divine Revelation” and, on the other hand, responds “to the demands of human reason.”⁹ It is a *moral* knowledge, which studies “the good and the evil of human acts and of the person who performs them; in this sense it is accessible to all people.”¹⁰ However, at the same time it is also *theological*, “inasmuch as it acknowledges that the origin and end of moral action are found in the One who ‘alone is good’

⁴ Cf. VS, no. 88.

⁵ Cf. VS, no. 88.

⁶ VS, no. 88.

⁷ VS, no. 89. The same thesis is stated, from different points of view in nos. 36-37, 49, 52, 100.

⁸ The trend to give unequal attention to the first two chapters of the encyclical is studied together by Melina, L., *La luce di Cristo sull’agire umano. L’enciclica Veritatis splendor*, in Borgonovo, G. – Cattaneo, A. (eds.), *Giovanni Paolo teologo. Nel segno delle encicliche* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), 218 ff.

⁹ VS, no. 29.

¹⁰ VS, no. 29.

and who, by giving himself to man in Christ, offers him the happiness of divine life.”¹¹

Chapter I of *Veritatis Splendor* proposes and justifies the Christological foundation of moral theology. The Christian moral life is vital adhesion to and communion with Christ. “People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil.”¹² Christ is the living fulfillment of the Law: “he himself becomes a living and personal Law.”¹³ “Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.”¹⁴ After *Veritatis Splendor* these theses have turned into a doctrinal instruction that is impossible to ignore. They are, however, theses which support further theological elaborations, and which have, before the encyclical, already been explored and proposed by various authors.¹⁵

Christologically based moral theology addresses those who, in addition to being moral agents, are both men and believers.¹⁶ This implies that the way to think about practical reason is to make possible a harmonious and

¹¹ VS, no. 29.

¹² VS, no. 8.

¹³ VS, no. 15.

¹⁴ VS, no. 19.

¹⁵ Among the works published between Vatican Council II and *Veritatis Splendor* include: Von Balthasar, *Neuf thèses pour un éthique chrétienne*, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 5 (1974-1976), (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1976), 613-645; Caffarra, C., *Viventi in Cristo*, (Milan: Jaca Book, 1981); Biffi, I., *Fondazione teologico-cristologica-ecclesiologica della morale*, in Various Authors, *Persona, verità e morale. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Teologia Morale (Roma, 7-12 aprile 1986)*, (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1987), 27-35; Scola, A., *Cristologia e morale*, in Various Authors, *Persona, verità e morale*, pp. 539-560; Chantraine, G. – Scola, “L’événement-Christ et la vie morale”, *Anthropotes* 3 (1987) 5-23; Tettamanzi, D., *L’uomo immagine di Dio. Linee fondamentali di morale cristiana*, (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1992); Idem., *Verità e libertà. Temi e prospettive di morale cristiana*, (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1993); Tremblay, R., *L’“Homme” qui divinise. Pour une interprétation christocentrique de l’existence*, (Montreal: Paulines, 1993). For the balance of the main publications of this period see: Doldi, M., *Fondamenti cristologici della morale in alcuni autori italiani. Bilancio e prospettive* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice, 2000), and Melina, L., *Cristo e il dinamismo dell’agire. Linee di rinnovamento della Teologia Morale Fondamentale*, (Pontifical University Lateran – Rome: Mursia, 2001), 91-111.

¹⁶ This is not to say that moral theology is meaningless for non-believers. It is this problem to which we now turn.

constructive continuity between human ethical rationality and the Christian faith. The meeting between the two has to be thought of in such a way that neither becomes altered nor modified. Christological dogma demands this.¹⁷ Chapter II of the encyclical discusses a “rightful autonomy of the practical reason,”¹⁸ precisely to ensure the continuity and consistency with what is stated in Chapter I, defending it from a wrong way of understanding moral reason that would make vain, in practice, any project with a Christological foundation.

Effectively, the concept of moral autonomy criticized in nos. 36-37 of *Veritatis Splendor*, which is generally known as “theonomous autonomy” or “moral autonomy in the Christian context,”¹⁹ ultimately leads to a dissociation between faith and concrete forms of moral discernment. Faith and theology would be concerned *solely* with what is often called a ‘transcendental’ dimension of moral conduct (the horizon of meaning, the motivations, the fundamental option, etc.), whereas the dimension that is called ‘categorical’, i.e., the determination of the content of actions in the special moral ambit, would be the exclusive competence of the autonomous reason. Normative ethics would correspond to rational morality, and parenesis to theology. In short: the “Christian” of Christian morality would consist *solely* in the deepest understanding and motivation of human ethical criteria, knowable before or independently of Christianity, which would now be placed under the sign of the grace of God in Christ.

The doctrinal problem of ‘theonomous autonomy’ is not due to there being

¹⁷ It seems to me that a very accurate mode of posing the relationship between faith and reason is that suggested by Scheeben: that the relationship is not dialectical, but ‘spousal’, the way in which one may consider Christ, the Man-God, and his two principles of activity, the divine and the human natures, as a type of the relationship that exists between the two principles of thought, reason and faith. Cf. Scheeben, M.J., *I misteri del Cristianesimo*, 3^a ed., (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1960), 797.

¹⁸ VS, no. 40.

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the authors, texts, and fundamental theses of these theological trends, as well as the criticism that the encyclical directs toward them, cf. Rhonheimer, M., *Autonomía y teonomía moral según la “Veritatis splendor”*, in Del Pozo Abejón, G., *Comentarios...*, cit., pp. 543-578; Rodríguez Luño, A., “‘Veritatis splendor’ un anno dopo. Appunti per un bilancio (I)”, *Acta Philosophica* 4 (1995) 242-260. A more synthetic look in Colom, E. – Rodríguez Luño, A., *Chosen in Christ to Be Saints: Fundamental Moral Theology*, trans. Thomas Howes, which is awaiting publication in print and can be accessed online at: <http://eticapolitica.net/corsodimorale/ChosenI.pdf>, pp. 49-55.

‘too much’ reason in it, but in that it contains ‘bad’ reason, a deformed reason. Thus, it also seems to me that a few misguided theological projects which are preoccupied with the Christological foundation of morality completely neglect the proper development of the rational dimension, as if to say it concerns the baggage that the Greek world left behind in Christianity. These authors forget that from our ontological condition as children of God in Christ and the Gospel teachings one cannot always deduce what here and now is just or unjust. They forget that the principle of the Incarnation does not destroy or bring down the human. They forget, finally, the warning that John Paul II gave in *Fides et Ratio*: “It is no less urgent that philosophy be recovered at the point where the understanding of faith is linked to the moral life of believers [. . .] Moral theology must turn to a philosophical ethics which looks to the truth of the good, to an ethics which is neither subjectivist nor utilitarian.”²⁰

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* has opened a fruitful theological path, while indicating its general outline. Theology is responsible for resolving the epistemological problem of properly integrating the rational aspect within the Christological foundational perspective, and for understanding the latter in such a way that it illuminates and informs all moral theology, and not remaining as reduced to a simple opening chapter. The task which ultimately remains open is that of carrying out an ethical mediation that is both well-grounded and consistent with the Christological perspective. Otherwise, we run the risk of this perspective becoming effectively redundant or inconclusive.

2 Some Methodological Principles for the Right Articulation of Faith and Reason in Moral Theology

Research on the effective influence of the Christian faith in the concrete contents of morality often finds itself conditioned by some general hermeneutic principles. As I have dealt with this problem on other occasions,²¹ I will now

²⁰ John Paul II, Enc, *Fides et Ratio*, 14-IX-1998, no. 98.

²¹ Cf. Colom, E. – Rodríguez Luño, A., *Chosen in Christ to Be Saints . . .*, 91-97; Rodríguez Luño, A., *Reflexiones sobre la especificidad de la moral de San Pablo*, in Trigo,

refer only to two.

The tendency to minimize the role of the Christian faith generally presupposes a normativistic vision of life and of moral thought. Such a view consists in thinking that life and moral experience can be dutifully interpreted in terms of adequacy between singular actions and the norms concerning them, so that the consistency and originality of a moral form (i.e., of a particular set of more or less organic moral teachings, such as the ‘New Testament morality’ or the ‘morality of St. Paul’) would have to be studied attending to the norms (regarding actions) that are proposed and to the mode in which they are justified. This standpoint is typical of most contemporary ethical reflection; especially of what is called an “ethics of the third person,”²² but is entirely foreign to a classically inspired ethics²³.

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* rightly says that morality “is not so much about rules to be followed, but *about the full meaning of life.*”²⁴ Even until the thirteenth century, ethical knowledge was configured as an investigation, philosophical or theological, concerning the comprehensive human good. Ethics sought to know what is the good of human life considered as a whole (the happiness of the Greeks, the beatitude of St. Augustine), and not what is the good or obligation of the singular action considered in isolation, as a moral atom. If one has to confront the study of the novelty of Christian morality, one must first consider its response to the question concerning the overall good of man. This was the main object of morality in apostolic times, and it remained so for many centuries. Subsequently, in a second instance and in the same context, the study may move on to adequately address the specific ethical criteria proposed for everyday life. The Christian answer to the fundamental ethical question for the good of human existence considered as a whole is the teaching about the salvific action of God in Christ and therefore about the salvation of humanity, which represents a novelty with respect

T. (ed.), *Dar razón de la esperanza. Homenaje al Prof. Dr. José Luis Illanes* (Pamplona: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2004), 708-712. Here I will return, with extensive modifications, some considerations of that final writing.

²² Cf. Rodríguez Luño, A., *Ética General*, 5th ed. (Pamplona: Eunsa, 2004), 55-60 and the bibliography cited therein.

²³ Cf. the complete study by Annas, J., *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁴ VS, no. 7.

to the Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean moral experiences,²⁵ and which is also novel in relation to the Old Testament and intertestamental religious-moral experiences.

A second inadequate hermeneutical principle to which I would like to call attention lies in the idea of the mutual exteriority between human morality and Christian morality and, ultimately, between reason and faith. These two elements, the ‘human’ and the ‘Christian’, would be able to exist alongside one another, even in perfect contiguity, but without being integrated. A criterion of conduct that—at least when considered abstractly—can be justified by rational inquiry could not be considered as properly Christian, that is, it could not be *the proper content* of the apostolic message that is received with faith. With an analytic study it may be demonstrated that this idea is extraneous to the Gospel teachings. Now I merely point out that Christ is the wisdom of God, central to the universal salvific design. He assumes and brings together (and exceeds) all that is humanly true and good. It is fitting to add, as an example, that St. Paul adopts the perspective of the

²⁵ Referring, as an example, to Pauline morality, most scholars point out the difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating it from the rest of the theology of St. Paul. Cf. for example, Furnish, V.P., *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville – New York: Abingdon Press, 1968), 13, 98, 110; Dunn, J.D.G., *La teologia dell’apostolo Paolo*, (Brescia: Paideia, 1999), 604-608. It is worth transcribing some of the conclusions reached by Furnish: “The evidence in Paul’s letters clearly demands a broadened and flexible conception of what “exhortation” is and involves. Consequently, the usual division of the letters into ‘theological’ and ‘ethical’ parts and the tendency to make a similar distinction within Paul’s preaching as a whole are rendered highly questionable” (p. 98). “In summary, when applied to Paul’s letters the categories of ‘theological’ and ‘ethical’ tend to confuse rather than clarify. The apostle’s ethical exhortations are expressed in a wide range of stylistic forms and appear in virtually every chapter, from first to last. It is inaccurate to say either that this concern is primarily theological and secondarily ethical, or the reverse, that it is primarily practical, secondarily theoretical. His concern is, in a word, *evangelical*: to preach the gospel” (p. 110). More broadly, Cullmann says that “it is quite inconceivable in early Christianity to have ethics without dogma” (Cullmann, O., *Cristo e il tempo. La concezione del tempo e della storia nel Cristianesimo primitivo*, 4th ed., [Bologna: Il Mulino, 1969], p. 261, our translation of the author’s Spanish translation). Analytic studies on coincidences or possible dependencies of concrete points of Pauline morality forget that the Greek pre-Christian moral experience and Christian moral experience are, in its overall form, diametrically different. This does not prevent, in principle, the existence of specific points of contact, however the weight that they sometimes want to give to these points of contact in the general drama of the moral conception of Saint Paul is very debatable.

new creation in Christ,²⁶ which goes—unexpectedly and in a non-deducible way—beyond the logic of creation, but without denying it or contradicting what it is; on the contrary, it fully demonstrates the meaning it has in the eternal plan of God. That which sound reason understands as good can also be content of Christian faith. Whoever already possesses this natural ethical knowledge will find confirmation in the faith. Whoever, for this reason or another, does not possess it, may receive it with faith.

Moreover, and above all, it should be noted that the Christian faith is not just a religious horizon that limits itself to putting within a salvific framework a human scenario that is already fully defined from the moral standpoint. However, neither does faith bring with it a complete human culture that would only be received in a space completely void of ethical content, constituting itself then as an *ethos* entirely distinct from, and as an alternative to, each and every form of human ethics. The salvific action of God in Christ breaks forth into a human world in which there is already something—sometimes a great deal—of moral knowledge. Faith enters into what exists, transforms it, renders it fruitful, and completes it, developing the function of a *definitive criterion of life*. Its final and definitive character is not opposed to a partial and critical recourse to the law of the Old Testament as a distinguishing criterion of right and wrong, nor does it prevent critical appropriation of the criteria of conduct found inscribed in the common healthy conscience, and—therefore—also those found in Greek customs and tradition:²⁷ “test everything; retain what is good,”²⁸ says St. Paul.

If from the abstract standpoint the novelty of faith does not mean that all its ethical requirements should be absolutely new and unheard of, from an existential and historical standpoint there is no doubt that the faithful of the early Christian communities were certain that adherence to the Christian message had assumed in them a profound moral transformation.²⁹ The early

²⁶ Cf. *2 Cor* 5:17; *Gal* 6:15. As new life: *Rom* 6:4; 7:6.

²⁷ Cf. *Rom* 2:14-16.

²⁸ *1 Thess* 5:21.

²⁹ From a sociological standpoint, even with all its limitations, see Meeks, W.A., *Cristiani dei primi secoli. Il mondo sociale dell'apostolo Paolo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), especially chapter 2. In *1 Cor* 6:8-10, St Paul lists behaviors and lifestyles that are incompatible with the Kingdom of God and later adds: “That is what some of you [idolaters, adulterers, effeminate men] used to be; but now you have had yourselves washed, you were

Christian communities were well aware that they would not have learned the purity of life of the pagan world around them. Naturally, this is a fact. This does not mean that understanding the excellence of the purity of life presupposed their faith in Christ, or that of anyone. However, from a concrete point of view the exposition of *Rom* 1:22-32 would have to be the subject of a closer reflection on our part.

3 The 'Renovation of the Mind' and of the Moral Discernment

Taking account of the general observations we have just made, we are going to put forward the way in which—in my view—the Christian faith informs and renews the concrete forms of moral discernment of the Christian.

A good starting point is *Rom* 12:2: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”³⁰ The new vital principles of Christianity (union with Christ through faith and baptism, the hope and charity that the Holy Spirit pours into our heart) renew the intellect and the capacity for moral discernment, making it possible to know the will of God: what God expects of His faithful in each moment. However, how do the principles of Christian life renew the capacity for moral discernment?

If we were to pose this question from the normativistic presupposition that was criticized before, it would be unlikely that we would find a satisfactory answer. We have to consider, however, that there are three elements which

sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (*1 Cor* 6:11). In *Phil* 2:15-16 he says that the faithful Christians “may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world, as you hold on to the word of life, so that my boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain”. In *1 Thess* there is contrasted the purity of life of the faithful to the impurity which is typical of those who do not know God (cf. *1 Thess* 4:3-5).

³⁰ On the significance and importance of this passage of *Rom*, cf. Therrien, G., *Le Discernement moral dans l'Épître aux Romains* (Rome: Accademia Alfonsiana, 1968); Feuillet, A., “Les fondements de la morale chrétienne d'après l'Épître aux Romains”, *Revue Thomiste* 70 (1970) 357-386.

explain the activity of practical reason and of human moral thought: the *goods* we seek, possess, and use; *the virtues or practical principles*, which express the measure and the mode in which those goods are sought, possessed and used rightfully for the sake of the comprehensive good of the person; and, finally, the *norms*, which are a linguistic expressive reflection of some of the more important ethical requirements of the virtues.³¹

If we were to do an analytical study of the Gospel teachings or of the letters of the *corpus paulinum*, we would caution that, for what regards moral behavior, the vital principles of Christianity (faith, charity, etc.) serve as a new light that illuminates the value and meaning of the goods (or lack thereof) and of the activities that make up our life: health, illness, pleasure, pain, success and failure, wealth and poverty, abundance and scarcity, freedom and slavery, marriage and celibacy, life and death. In this new understanding of goods, there is still the renewal of the attitude that the Christian adopts toward them and their deprivation, a new way to seek and possess them.

Consider some examples taken from St. Paul. Christ voluntarily chose poverty for himself. Our Lord Jesus Christ, “for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”³² Poverty, scarcity, detachment from one’s possessions, which are viewed humanly as evil, gain for the Christian a positive value, ordered toward identification with Christ. Poverty becomes a good: something to be desired and sought. The Christian detachment does not only refer to economic goods. All goods have to be handled with inner freedom, as befits whoever has their eyes on true life in Christ: “I tell you, brothers, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away. I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord.”³³ Suffering, persecution, and painful failure are also part of the way to live in Christ: “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with

³¹ For a study that focuses on the structures of practical reason, cf. Rodríguez Luño, A., *Ética General*, (2004), especially Ch. VII and VIII.

³² *2 Cor* 8:9.

³³ *1 Cor* 7:29-32.

him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.”³⁴ Moreover, freedom and slavery—which existed at the time—received a different valuation: “Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when you were called? Do not be concerned but, even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of it. For the slave called in the Lord is a freed person in the Lord, just as the free person who has been called is a slave of Christ”;³⁵ today we can understand it thus: we shall value and love the freedom to serve God and our brothers, graciously accepting the bonds and constraints that all true service brings with it. A final example can be that of humility (*ταπεινοφροσυνη*). This term is used in the profane Greek only in the negative sense, because the renunciation of self-assertion is incomprehensible in the Hellenistic world. Some stoic thinkers considered it to be a vice; Flavius Josephus speaks of it as a quality of slaves.³⁶ In St. Paul it is designated as a morally excellent and recommended quality: “Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves.”³⁷ With humility, we imitate Christ, who “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”³⁸

We can point to many other examples. However, even if we made a complete list of what is found in the New Testament, we would not get a closed system. The nature and the way in which this “renewing of the mind” takes place makes Christian moral discernment a reality that is always open to history. The principles of Christian life carry with it a new standard for and measure of human goods. Out of the goods which could be sought and managed by the faithful of Pauline communities, which we may seek and manage in the twenty-first century, and which Christians will seek and manage in centuries to come. In more technical terms, here we find a true interior renewal of the practical principles of the human reason,³⁹ for which Chris-

³⁴ *Rom* 8:17-18.

³⁵ *1 Cor*, 7:20-22.

³⁶ Cf. Esser, H. H., voz *ταπεινο*, in Coenen, L. – Beyreuther, E. – Bietenhard, H. (eds.), *Dizionario dei concetti biblici del Nuovo Testamento*, 4th ed. (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1991), 1891-1893.

³⁷ *Phil* 2:3.

³⁸ *Phil* 2:8; cf. also *2 Cor* 11:7; *Rom* 12:16.

³⁹ On the concept of practical principles of reason, cf. Rhonheimer, M., *La perspectiva de la moral. Fundamentos de la Ética Filosófica* (Madrid: Rialp 2000), especially chapter

tianity critically illuminates and modifies all human cultural syntheses that will happen throughout time, not fully identifying with any of them.

Certainly the righteous attitudes toward the various goods can be expressed in normative terms related to individual actions. So too did St. Paul, who frequently had done so; to the extent that the material permitted it and to the extent that it was necessary for the faithful and desirable for the communities. However, norms and moral codes are in any case a derived reality, and research concerning the novelty of Christian morality or on any other moral form should not be centered on them.

Renewed moral discernment does not mean, as some fear,⁴⁰ confinement to a moral *ghetto*. St. Paul appears ready to define the criteria of moral judgment as widely as possible, invoking the sense of right and wrong presented in the healthy common conscience: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”⁴¹ He even shows great justice toward non-believers, and thus urges the faithful to live “with honor to those outside.”⁴² He trusts in the moral sense present in the best people of his time, but also knows that the lifestyle that he teaches is scarce outside of Christian communities. In any case, what is decisive is not so much the existence of common elements or new elements, but the fact that everything is thought of as new and reworked in the light of faith in Jesus Christ, who is the supreme paradigm of the Christian life.

4 A Particular Issue: The Problem of Intrinsically Evil Actions

The organizers of this Congress have asked me to also treat of the problem of intrinsically evil actions. It is a complex problem, which I have discussed on

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⁴⁰ Thus Mieth, D., “Universale Werte oder Sonderethik? Wohin geht die Moraltheologie?”, *Concilium*, XXXVII/4 (2001) 522-527.

⁴¹ *Phil* 4:8.

⁴² *1 Thess* 4:12; cf. also *1 Cor* 8:21; *2 Cor* 10:32-33.

other occasions,⁴³ and on which it is possible to touch on only a few aspects at this time.

It has rightly been written that the thesis of the material non-specificity of Christian morality feeds the ‘materialist’ or the ‘physicalist’ conception of moral norms, because it can be more easily understood that they are the exclusive responsibility of the autonomous reason.⁴⁴ Although the problem also has other roots, it is true that this ‘materialism’ or ‘physicalism’, applied to the theory of action, is the greatest difficulty for understanding the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* concerning intrinsically evil actions.

An editorial from ‘L’Osservatore Romano’, published on May 20th, 1995, synthetically exposed the core of the question. “Giving instructions on how to understand the moral object, the encyclical warns against consequentialism and proportionalism, as theories that conceive the constitution of the moral object so that it allows, primarily, to make the action a morally neutral choice and then, allows for a continued ‘re-definition’ of the action from ulterior motives and consequences. In this way, it is an argumentative context that certainly does not negate the principle that the end does not justify the means, but it does render it virtually unenforceable. This is a complex methodological operation that must absolutely be rejected.”⁴⁵

The method proposed by proportionalism for the moral valuation of actions thus has two stages.⁴⁶ The first stage is a physicalist way of describing the

⁴³ Cf. Rodríguez Luño, A., *Teleologismo, consequenzialismo e proporzionalismo*, in Various Authors, *Lettera Enciclica “Veritatis splendor” del Sommo Pontefice Giovanni Paolo II. Testo e commenti*, Quarterly of “L’Osservatore Romano” 22, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 223-226; Idem., *El acto moral y la existencia de una moralidad intrínseca absoluta*, in Del Pozo Abejón, G. (ed.), *Comentarios a la “Veritatis Splendor”*, cit., pp. 693-714; ID., “‘Veritatis splendor’ un anno dopo. Appunti per un bilancio (II)”, *Acta Philosophica* 5 (1996) 47-75; ID., *Universalidad e inmutabilidad de los preceptos de la ley natural: la existencia de una moralidad intrínseca absoluta*, paper presented at the International Congress of Moral Theology, organized by the Catholic University of San Antonio (Murcia, November 27th-29th, 2003). The following pages are inspired by the latter study.

⁴⁴ Cf. Angelini, G., *Teologia Morale Fondamentale. Tradizione, Scrittura e teoria* (Milan: Glossa, 1999), 231.

⁴⁵ “La recezione della ‘Veritatis splendor’ nella letteratura teologica”, *L’Osservatore Romano*, 20-V-1995, p. 1, our translation of the author’s Spanish translation.

⁴⁶ Among the works of proportionalist authors prior to *Veritatis Splendor* one can see

voluntary action that makes it morally neutral or 'pre-moral'. This physicalism is to be overcome in a second stage, submitting 'neutralized' voluntary action to a process of 're-definition' based on the subject's intention or on the consequences. It should not be accepted that in some voluntary actions the deliberate purpose that constitutes them may possess a contrariety to natural principles of the right reason (to the virtues),⁴⁷ which is incompatible with a will oriented toward the human good.

We should pause to view what this deliberated purpose is that is constitutive of voluntary action, for such a purpose is the moral object that gives to some actions an absolute intrinsic morality.⁴⁸ Let us consider the example of the conduct of the motorist, Peter. If we say: "the muscles of Peter's right arm contract," we are speaking of a physical fact, and we are adopting the descriptive method of Physiology, not of Ethics. St. Thomas Aquinas speaks in this respect of the *materia ex qua* of the action. We still do not have a voluntary action or a moral object. If, in turn, we say, "Peter indicates that he will turn right by raising his arm," we are already speaking of a voluntary action, possible for any sane person, in which the body movement (raising the right arm) is due to a purpose, endowed with meaning for him and for others.

the following: Knauer, P., "La détermination du bien et du mal par le principe du double effet", *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 97 (1965) 356-374; McCormick, R.A., "Notes in Moral Theology", *Theological Studies* 28 (1967) 749-800, 36 (1975) 77-129, 40 (1979) 59-112; Schüller, B., *Die Begründung sittlicher Urteile* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1973); Fuchs, J., *Responsabilità personale e norma morale* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1978); Böckle, F., *Moral fundamental*, (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1980). After *Veritatis Splendor*: Fuchs, J., *El acto moral: lo intrínsecamente malo*, in Mieth, D. (ed.), *La teología moral ¿en fuera de juego? Una respuesta a la encíclica "Veritatis splendor"* (Barcelona: Herder, 1995), pp. 199-217; Fuchs, J., "Das Problem Todsünde", *Stimmen der Zeit* 212/2 (1994) 75-86; Janssens, L., "Teleology and proportionality. Thoughts about the Encyclical 'Veritatis splendor'", *Bijdragen, tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 55 (1994) 118-132; Knauer, P., "Zu Grundbegriffen der Enzyklika 'Veritatis splendor'", *Stimmen der Zeit* 212/1 (1994) 14-26; McCormick, R.A., "Killing the Patient", *The Tablet* (30-X-1993) 1410-1411; Idem, "Some early reactions to 'Veritatis splendor'", *Theological Studies* 55/3 (1994) 481-506; Wolbert, W., *Los actos "en sí mismos malos" y el consecuencialismo*, in Mieth, D. (ed.), *La teología moral ...*, cit., pp. 101-124.

⁴⁷ "In ratione practica praeexistunt quaedam ut principia naturaliter nota, et huiusmodi sunt fines virtutum moralium, quia finis se habet in operabilibus sicut principium in speculativis" (St. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 47, a. 6, c.).

⁴⁸ For a more comprehensive theory of moral action, we refer the reader to Colom, E.- Rodríguez Luño, A., *Chosen in Christ to Be Saints*, Ch. VI. http://eticaepolitica.net/corsodimorale/Chosen_I.pdf

Aquinas speaks of *materia circa quam*,⁴⁹ of the moral object of choice, stating that such an object is a *forma a ratione concepta*,⁵⁰ i.e., that the moral object is formally a purpose or an operational project conceived and valued by the practical reason, and chosen as such. The material element of the object, raising the arm, may respond to a different purpose, for example, threatening someone, and then it happens that the same act, from the standpoint of the *genus naturae*, would actually be a different act from the standpoint of *genus moris*.⁵¹ ‘To signal in anticipation of a right turn’ is a good action, different from ‘threatening someone’. The moral object of these two actions is completely different, and thus we have two different moral actions by virtue of their moral object, and not their intention. In order to distinguish these two types of actions one does not need to speak of the intention for which Peter decides to warn that he is turning to the right or that for which Peter decides to raise his arm to threaten someone. The intention to indicate that one is turning to the right or that one is threatening are intentions intrinsic to the action, which constitutes the human action as an action of a particular species, and which the theological tradition calls the *finis operis*, which consists in indicating whether one is turning or threatening. In other words: if—considering Peter’s action—we ignore the movement of his arm, what remains? There remains the purpose of indicating a turn to the right, or of making a threat. Such a purpose is a *forma a ratione concepta* which informs and gives meaning to the movement of his body and which, as such, is the moral object. Thus *Veritatis Splendor* says that “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.”⁵²

In accordance with this, the moral object of the moral action ‘contraception’ is not to swallow an antioviulatory pill with a little bit of water. To swallow

⁴⁹ “Obiectum non est materia ex qua, sed materia circa quam, et habet quodammodo rationem formae, in quantum dat speciem” (*Ibid.*, I-II, q. 18, a. 2, ad 2). “Obiecta, secundum quod comparantur ad actus exteriores, habent rationem materiae circa quam, sed secundum quod comparantur ad actum interiorem voluntatis, habent rationem finium; et ex hoc habent quod dent speciem actui” (*Ibid.*, I-II, q. 72, a. 3, ad 2). See also I-II, q. 73, a. 3, ad 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 18, a. 10, c.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3.

⁵² VS, no. 78.

that pill may be the moral action ‘contraception’, but it may also be another completely different moral action, such as the therapeutic action of which is spoken in *Humanae Vitae*, no. 15,⁵³ or also the action of warding off the effects of foreseeable sexual violence as in the case of the entry of an enemy army into the city. If we want to know whether the moral action is ‘contraception’, we have to define the purpose or project, the *forma a ratione concepta*, which constitutes it, and therefore we have to say that contraception is any action “which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means.”⁵⁴ Since human action is a project or purpose conceived and valued by practical reason, and as such is deliberately chosen, human action can never be considered as ‘pre-moral’. The death of a man himself, caused by an earthquake or by a beast, is a ‘pre-moral’ evil. The deliberate decision to murder is, in turn, a moral action, and cannot be viewed in any way otherwise.

Proportionalist authors, despite protests against the ‘physicalists’, use a mechanical-causal concept of action.⁵⁵ They see human action from the outside, without considering its internal dynamism, and see it as an event that causes particular effects in the world. The act of killing could not be intrinsically evil because killing includes any action, carried out by a man, which in any way is followed by the death of another, and this includes voluntary homicide, self-defense, a surgeon killing the patient on whom he is operating, just war, etc. It is subsumed under a similar type of moral norm completely different from action, which entails that every moral rule has exceptions. Self-defense, just war, or the death penalty are seen as exceptions to the rule ‘do not kill’, which therefore cannot be considered as valid *semper et pro semper*.⁵⁶ In a similar way, the action of defending against the effects of

⁵³ “On the other hand, the Church does not consider at all illicit the use of those therapeutic means necessary to cure bodily diseases, even if a foreseeable impediment to procreation should result there from—provided such impediment is not directly intended for any motive whatsoever.” (Paul VI, Enc. *Humanae Vitae*, 25-VII-1968, no. 15).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 14.

⁵⁵ Cf. on his point Rhonheimer, M., “‘Intrinsically Evil Acts’ and the Moral Viewpoint: Clarifying a Central Teaching of ‘Veritatis Splendor’”, *The Thomist* 58/1 (1994) 168.

⁵⁶ One who sees things very differently is St. Thomas of Aquinas, for whom the acts mentioned above are different moral actions: “Possibile tamen est quod unus actus secundum speciem naturae, ordinetur ad diversos fines voluntatis, sicut hoc ipsum quod

sexual violence or the therapeutic assumption of an antiovulatory are seen as exceptions to the moral rule on contraception, which is understood simply as taking a pill that inhibits ovulation. One might ask what they intend with this action. Having assented to the principle that any moral action (such as they understand it) is intrinsically evil and that all rules have exceptions leaves the door open so that actions must be judged on a case by case basis, which also opens the possibility not only of distinguishing homicide from self-defense, or of distinguishing contraception from protection from effects of sexual assault, but also of making case by case judgments on diverse actions that truly are acts of contraception or voluntary abortion, establishing essential moral distinctions between these actions on the basis of consequences or of the ulterior motive to which each action responds. This process creates not merely a few doctrinal problems, and above all, completely distorts the reality of action, of practical reason, and of human will.⁵⁷

After these clarifications, it is possible to better understand what intrinsically evil actions are and the problems associated with them. Let us consider the action of returning to the owner that which has been entrusted as a deposit and the rule that one ‘must return what has been entrusted as a deposit’. Generally, this rule expresses a requirement of the virtue of justice, and demands compliance. However, there can be cases in which returning the deposit—if, for example, the deposit consisted of a weapon or an explosive—would be unjust because it would make one an accomplice to a murder or an act of terrorism. In reference to these cases, Aquinas says that certain moral precepts, referring to a certain type of action or formulated in a certain way, are valid *ut in pluribus* and are not valid *ut in paucioribus*.⁵⁸ In a similar sense Suarez speaks of the *mutatio materiae*, that is, of a change in the action itself, which makes it the case that this action, although similar as an external event to that which normally takes place, is actually a different action, and does not fall under the aforementioned moral rule. There is not properly a

est occidere hominem, quod est idem secundum speciem naturae, potest ordinari sicut in finem ad conservationem iustitiae, et ad satisfaciendum irae. Et ex hoc erunt diversi actus secundum speciem moris, quia uno modo erit actus virtutis, alio modo erit actus vitii” (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3).

⁵⁷ We have worked on this problem more widely in “‘Veritatis Splendor’ un anno dopo. Appunti per un bilancio (II)”, (1996).

⁵⁸ Cf. St. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4, c. y ad 2; q. 94, a. 5, c.

change in the moral rule or in the demand of justice expressed by it. We are simply before an imperfection or inadequacy in the linguistic formulation of the requirements of the virtues, when they have to be expressed in a short and simple form. Thus Suarez says that, “it should be further considered, while not being written on tablets or paper but in minds, the natural law is not always formulated in our conscience with these general or indefinite terms with which we express it verbally or in writing.” Moreover, referring to the example of the deposit, he adds: “This law is usually formulated in only these terms: *The deposit must be returned as it was received*. The rest is understood, for it is not possible to explain everything in the formula of a law that is given in a human manner.”⁵⁹ Suarez himself warns that these phenomena in no way deny the universality and immutability of the natural law as it is present in virtuous reason, which is its appropriate home.

However, there also exist actions that are describable in concrete terms which conserve their intrinsic intentionality in all circumstances.⁶⁰ On these actions there can be formulated valid rules not only *ut in pluribus*, but always because the actions to which these rules relate cannot ever pertain to a distinct intentionality or deliberated purpose. They are prohibitions that are absolute in the strictest sense. Examples could be the rules ‘do not lie’, ‘do not kill’, ‘do not commit adultery’, etc. Naturally, to say what these rules are requires the patient work of defining actions according to their *genus moris*, which in turn requires an attentive understanding of the structure or normative content of the ethical virtues, that is to say, of the practical principles of virtuous reason. It is a task that has not yet been fully or satisfactorily achieved with regard to some behaviors. Consider the complexity of the discussion about the exact definition of lying.⁶¹ However, understanding that moral actions are not merely physical events followed by consequences, because they have in themselves an intelligible content for which they are chosen—and which is an intrinsic intentionality of the first level that is followed by the intentionality of the second level that is called intention—allows us to fully understand

⁵⁹ Suárez, F., *De Legibus ac Deo Legislatore*, lib. II, c. 13, no. 6. We quote the Catalan translation of the bilingual edition of the *Corpus Hispanorum de Pace* (Madrid: CSIC, 1973), our translation.

⁶⁰ Cf. clarifications on this point, offered by Rhonheimer, M., *La perspectiva de la moral*, (2000), 348-368.

⁶¹ Cf. Millán-Puelles, A., *El interés por la verdad* (Madrid: Rialp, 1997), 294-334.

that, as St. Paul says, there are behaviors that, when chosen freely, exclude one from inheriting the kingdom of God.⁶²

⁶² Cf. *1Cor* 6:8-10.