The Splendor of Truth

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POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II

FOREWORD BY BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

INTRODUCTION BY MATTHEW R. PETRUSEK

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Contents

Foreword

Bishop Robert Barron

There is probably no word that stirs the American heart more than "freedom." But the mainstream of American culture interprets that term along modern lines, construing it as spontaneous personal choice and self-determination—a capacity to hover above the yes and the no and go in one direction or the other. Nowhere is this view of freedom more radically expressed than in the infamous *Casey* decision of the United States Supreme Court in regard to abortion, which declared, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."[1] Even with regard to the most sacred and elemental things, it is all "up to us."

John Paul II—poet, philosopher, pope, and now saint—was one of the most eloquent defenders of freedom in the second half of the twentieth century. But throughout his pontificate, he insisted upon a deeper view of freedom, one that held sway in the classical and Christian periods. It is not a freedom *from* coercion, but a freedom *for* excellence. As he famously put it, "Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do

1. *Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), no. 851.

what we ought."[2] In a word, it was a view of freedom correlated to *truth*.

This was the governing theme of what I consider the greatest of this great saint's encyclicals: *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*), which was issued in 1993. The opening chapter of the letter is an analysis of the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man in the Gospel of Matthew (19:16–22). How wonderful that this major statement of Catholic moral theology commences not with philosophical abstractions but with Jesus! But this Christocentrism should not be surprising to the attentive student of Karol Wojtyła's thought, for what is on explicit display here is the Christianity that had, from the beginning, characterized all of his moral philosophy, even in its most abstruse expressions. The truth to which subjective freedom is oriented has always been ultimately the truth who is the person of Christ.

The story of the rich young man demonstrates, for John Paul II, the dynamics of authentic freedom. At no point in this conversation is there a hint of violence or coercion. Even at the end, when the young man walks away sad, unwilling to respond to Jesus' demand, the Lord lets him go. The true God does not compete with freedom; rather, he awakens it and directs it. We also notice a dovetailing of the inner and the outer, of the objective and the subjective, characteristic of Wojtyła's philosophical perspective on the human act. The *sequela Christi* is freedom's objective and subjective norm: in choosing Christ, the person opts for his proper end (because Jesus *is* the God he seeks), and he finds his proper self (for Jesus *is* the paradigm of a renewed humanity). In short, human freedom is realized in a surrender to the truth of God, and that truth is none other than a God who hands over his life to us.

2. John Paul II, "Eucharistic Celebration: Homily of His Holiness John Paul II," October 8, 1995, vatican.va.

Why did John Paul II write *Veritatis Splendor*? In a way, the entire encyclical is, as Dr. Petrusek shows in his introduction, a sustained argument against "proportionalism," a moral theory that was all the rage when I was going through university and seminary studies. The proportionalists relocated moral truth from the *categorical*, which has to do with particular outward acts, to—how like the philosophical programs of Descartes and Kant—the *transcendental*, which has to do with the inner self. This relocation tends, inevitably, toward a rejection of the idea that some acts are "intrinsically evil" (*intrinsece malum*)—that is, gravely evil by virtue of the kinds of acts that they are. Instead, the determination of good and evil, for the proportionalists, finally takes place at the transcendental and not the categorical level.

John Paul II saw that such moral reasoning—however attractive—rests upon bad anthropology. The self is constituted, at the deepest level, precisely by the choices that one makes. The categorical and the transcendental do not exist as separate ontological categories; rather, one is intimately constituted by the other. Moreover, proportionalism, when consistently applied, opens the door to moral chaos. John Paul II stood athwart this slippery slope to relativism and insisted upon the category of intrinsic evil.

But in a broader sense, *Veritatis Splendor* is an eloquent condemnation of the entire modern misunderstanding of freedom. John Paul II saw that creating our own values gives freedom a primacy over truth that it ought never have; indeed, it makes truth itself a creation of freedom. What we do with our freedom is not "up to us," for freedom itself is "given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly." In the measure that we stand in relation to the Word, we cannot be the creators of our own truth. If liberalism hinges on tolerance, Christianity hinges on the acceptance of God's truth.

When human beings make themselves the criterion of good and evil—in a word, when they make themselves into God—they undermine the condition for the possibility of the peace that springs from authentic freedom. In the Genesis telling, of course, this is precisely what happened with humanity: having grasped pathetically at divinity, the first humans fell out of right relation to God and, consequently, out of right rapport with one another; immediately after the original sin, there emerged recrimination, scapegoating, violence, jealousy, murder, and domination.

Authentic peace and liberty will be achieved only in correlation to the Word of God that appropriately grounds them. Paul can say, "For freedom . . . Christ set you free" (Gal. 5:1), and he can proclaim himself a "servant" (or "slave") of Christ Jesus (Rom. 1:1), because he is not saddled with a modern conception of freedom. He knows that when we are enslaved to the truth that appeared in Christ, we are free to realize who God wants us to be.

John Paul II stands in this Pauline tradition, and his *Veritatis Splendor* is an increasingly relevant text for our times. Freedom without truth lapses into arbitrariness, and truth without freedom devolves into oppression; they must always be yoked together.

Introduction

Matthew R. Petrusek

Pope St. John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*) is one of the most important encyclicals ever written. It is also one of the most controversial, at least within many Catholic academic circles. This is an odd juxtaposition: a pope, now a saint, clearly and courageously defends biblical and natural law morality amid a troubling rise in moral relativism in the West, and his most vociferous critics come not from "the world," but rather from among the flock. Indeed, when the encyclical was promulgated in 1993, the response from the secular media was often more balanced and charitable than that of many Catholic theology departments. The *New York Times*, for example, downplayed any potential controversy, observing, "[*Veritatis Splendor*] will stimulate an important assessment of the state of Catholic moral theology, a development that will affect the Catholic faithful and, indeed, the church's role in public life."[1] Another cultural behemoth at the time, the *Washington Post*, was even more conciliatory, stating, "Six years in the writing, the 179-page encyclical is considerably more complex and nuanced than what was portrayed in earlier reports, particularly recent articles in the British press, which characterized it largely as a list of pontifical

1. Peter Steinfels, "Papal Encyclical Says Church Must Enforce Basic Morality," *The New York Times*, October 3, 1993, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/03/us/papal-encyclical-says-church-must-enforce-basic-morality.html.

'don'ts' focusing on sexual behavior."[2] Even the *Los Angeles Times* gave space to George Weigel, a biographer and ardent defender of John Paul II, to praise the document.[3]

Many moral theologians had a different reaction. In a 1994 article in the influential journal *Theological Studies*, for example, Jesuit and former University of Notre Dame professor Fr. Richard McCormick sympathetically catalogued the pushback *Veritatis Splendor* had received from "theological experts." In a representative example, Fr. McCormick quotes the late German theologian Fr. Bernard Häring—whom McCormick calls "revered"—to characterize *Veritatis Splendor* as, in the words of Häring, an encyclical grounded in "distrust."

> After reading the new papal encyclical carefully, I felt greatly discouraged. Several hours later I suffered long-lasting seizures of the brain, and looked forward hopefully to leaving the Church on earth for the Church in Heaven. . . . Away with all distrust in our Church! Away with all attitudes, mentalities and structures which promote it! We should let the Pope know that we are wounded by the many signs of his rooted distrust, and discouraged by the manifold structures of distrust which he has allowed to be established. We need him to soften towards us, the whole Church needs it. Our witness to the world needs it. The urgent call to effective ecumenism needs it.[4]

2. Gustav Niebuhr, "Church Faces 'Crisis' in Moral Teaching, Papal Letter Warns," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 1993, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/10/04/church-faces-crisis-in-moral-teaching-papal-letter-warns/295bd6ec-0e0c-486f-934a-eebdeb71fdd4/.

3. George Weigel, "Perspective on Morality: The Right of Being Able to Do What We Ought: The Pope's Encyclical Celebrates the Human Capacity to Live a Good Life—A Welcome Antidote to American Relativism," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1993, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-10-06-me-42611-story.html.

4. Richard A. McCormick, "Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 481–505, 489–490.

For Fr. Häring and, it is implied, for Fr. McCormick, the cardinal sin of *Veritatis Splendor* is its failure to recognize that all individuals should have the freedom to reach their own moral conclusions—not to have those conclusions dictated by the Church. This kind of reasoning may tickle the ears of certain quarters of the secular world that have long imbibed the licentious maxim "You do you, I'll do me." But it begs the central philosophical and theological question that the encyclical is directly addressing: Do intrinsically evil acts exist? In other words, are there actions that fall under an absolute moral prohibition and that must *never* be committed—no matter what the intentions, circumstances, or consequences?

Moral theologians like McCormick and Häring will, as we'll see below, unnecessarily complicate this question, but it's important to note up front that there are ultimately only two possible responses:

> Option A: Moral absolutes *do* exist (they are grounded in moral reality);
>
> or
>
> Option B: Moral absolutes *do not* exist (they are not grounded in moral reality).

There are many secular moral theories that fit the second category. They include utilitarianism or consequentialism (morality is defined by the greatest good for the greatest number), emotivism (morality is defined by feeling rather than reason), positivism (morality is defined by what society, in the form of law, says it is), and pragmatism (morality is defined by what is most useful). In each of these instances, however, the term "moral" in "moral theory" is misleading because each theory, in its own way, leads to relativism—both because it rejects, on

principle, the existence of moral absolutes and, more broadly, because it lacks a coherent intellectual grounding for "morality" itself. Consequentialism/utilitarianism, for example, is based on empirical observation, yet observation alone can neither coherently identify moral values ("good" and "evil" must first be defined a priori to be observed in the world) nor make a rational distinction between superior and inferior values (both caring for children and abusing children are forms of observable human behavior; observation alone cannot tell us which is morally better). Emotivism, since it is grounded in human feeling, must maintain that all feelings have equal moral value, which would mean that "loving your neighbor" and "hating your neighbor" would have the same moral weight and thus cancel each other out. Positivism, in turn, typically appeals to the laws of a society as the basis for morality, yet different societies have irreducibly contradictory laws (e.g., some legally permit killing the unborn, some do not), and positivism has no rational way to morally distinguish between them. And pragmatism is rooted in a vicious circularity, calling for society to pursue what is most "useful" yet leaving it to society alone to determine both what defines "useful" and the goal that "the useful" should seek to attain.

In contrast to these secular accounts of morality, the Catholic position is and always has been clear: option A is the correct answer; both morality and moral absolutes *do* exist. The purpose of *Veritatis Splendor* is to reaffirm this universal truth.

Put in these stark terms—upholding moral absolutes vs. denying moral absolutes—the fact that some Catholic moral theologians have so severely criticized *Veritatis Splendor* (sometimes, as we saw above, with couch-fainting histrionics) becomes even stranger. As even the secular press admitted at the time of its release, John Paul II says very little about *what* specific actions are prohibited, focusing rather on the existence of the category of moral absolutes itself. Are Fr. McCormick and Fr. Häring and

their theological allies objecting to this? Are they denying the existence of universally binding, inalienable moral laws?

It's here that things get complicated. Fr. McCormick and Fr. Häring would argue that there is a third possibility for answering the question, a compromise that avoids relativism and upholds moral absolutes on the one hand, while still giving freedom to the individual to determine if and how a moral law applies to them on the other. This "third way" defines both the substance and goal of a theory called "proportionalism," which was popular within Catholic academic circles when *Veritatis Splendor* came out and remains influential among many moral theologians to this day.

How does proportionalism respond to the question of moral absolutes? Recall the first two alternatives:

> Option A: Moral absolutes do exist (they are grounded in moral reality);
>
> or
>
> Option B: Moral absolutes do not exist (they are not grounded in moral reality).

It is important to highlight, at this point, that there is an implicit epistemological assumption—that is, an assumption about what human beings can *know*—in both claims. To hold position A, for example, is to affirm not only that "moral absolutes do exist (they are grounded in moral reality)," but also that we can *know* both that they exist in a general sense (there is a real category of "moral absolutes") and what defines the content of a specific moral absolute (for example, a prohibition against killing the innocent). Likewise, to hold position B is not only to hold the view that "moral absolutes do not exist (they are not grounded in moral reality)," but also that we can *know* that such

absolutes do not exist, which necessarily implies knowing that no specific example of a moral absolute exists either.

Against this backdrop, the proportionalist alternative—the ostensible middle way—becomes easier to identify. In response to the question "Do moral absolutes exist?" proportionalists would affirm option C below:[5]

> Option A: Moral absolutes do exist (they are grounded in moral reality)—and both the *category* and *content of the category* can be known universally (meaning all rational people should arrive at the same conclusion about both the existence of moral absolutes and what defines specific moral absolutes).
>
> Option B: Moral absolutes do not exist (they are not grounded in moral reality)—and both the *absence of the category* and the *absence of the content in the category* can be universally known (meaning all rational people should arrive at the same conclusion about the nonexistence of moral absolutes and, consequently, the nonexistence of any specific moral absolute).
>
> Option C: Moral absolutes do exist (they are grounded in moral reality); however, while the *category of moral absolutes* can be universally known, the *specific content of the category* cannot be universally known (meaning all rational people should agree on the existence of moral absolutes but can

5. One might argue that there is a fourth possibility: moral skepticism. However, saying "I don't know if moral absolutes exist" doesn't solve any problems, either theoretically or practically. For example, if you are a moral skeptic, shouldn't you be skeptical about your skepticism (and skeptical of your skepticism of your skepticism)? It's not clear how this position avoids falling into an absurdum trap by getting caught in an infinite whirlpool of skepticism, which, if applied, would lead either to moral paralysis (not being able to act at all) or arbitrary action (not having any rational reason why you choose one course of action over another).

legitimately differ on what defines any specific moral absolute and whether it applies to them).

The difference between position A and position C may sound highly abstract, but in the proportionalist's mind, the distinction between knowing that a category of moral absolutes exists, which positions A and C agree on, and knowing what defines a *specific* moral absolute (i.e., an action that is universally, always prohibited, which position A and C disagree on) is crucial. Indeed, it is the alleged failure to mark this distinction that explains why many proportionalists, including Fr. McCormick and Fr. Häring, take such issue with *Veritatis Splendor*.

To understand the relevant issue here, it's helpful to step back and get a better sense of proportionalism's basic contours. In an article entitled "Proportionalism: An Old But Stubborn Foe," Bishop Robert Barron provides a succinct definition of the theory's methodology and moral logic:

> According to the proportionalist theorists, there are no moral acts that are intrinsically good or evil, only acts that have both positive and negative consequences. Accordingly, the way that one should gauge the goodness or wickedness of a given act is rationally to assess its effects and determine whether the positive outweighs the negative. If there is a preponderance (a proportion) of the former over the latter, the act under consideration can be considered morally praiseworthy.[6]

It is important to add to this description that proportionalism distinguishes between what it calls "non-moral" or "pre-moral good" on the one hand, and "non-moral" or "pre-moral" evil on the other. These two categories of good and evil constitute the

6. Bishop Robert Barron, "Proportionalism: An Old But Stubborn Foe," Word on Fire, April 25, 2023, https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/barron/proportionalism-an-old-but-stubborn-foe/.

general ground and horizon in which all human actions occur; they constitute the "material" out of which "good acts" and "bad acts" are made. Pre-moral/non-moral goods include physical life, physical health, and material possessions; pre-moral/non-moral evils, also sometimes called "ontic evils" ("ontic" meaning having to do with the nature of existence), include death, disease, and loss of material goods. According to proportionalism, the only way that one can know how to act—what is good to do or bad to do—is to consider, within one's current circumstances, which action would lead to the greatest *proportion* of retaining or advancing pre-moral/non-moral goods over pre-moral/non-moral evils. In other words, the good action is the action that will have the *consequence* of producing more good than evil. Bishop Barron offers this example:

> When contemplating whether an abortion could be justified, the proportionalist would assess the various and complex outcomes of the act. On the one hand, we have the death of the child and the inevitable sadness of all concerned, etc.; and on the other hand, we have, say, an improvement in the overall mental health of the mother, an amelioration of the family's economic situation, greater career opportunities for the mother, etc. If, in the judgment of the moral reasoner, the good consequences outweigh the bad, the abortion can be permitted.[7]

The critique that Bishop Barron, like John Paul II, makes of proportionalist thinking is that it is ultimately indistinguishable from run-of-the-mill utilitarianism and thus dissolves all moral absolutes. Recall that utilitarianism upholds that right action is always the action that produces the greatest amount of good and the least amount of evil, which means that no act can ever be

7. Barron, "Proportionalism."

deemed off-limits a priori. It will always depend on the intentions and circumstances of the acting person. So, for example, from a utilitarian point of view, the greatest good for the greatest number may generally prohibit the killing of innocent people; however, if it can be reasonably predicted that killing one or more innocent individuals in a particular context—say, during a war, pandemic, or riot—will, on balance, lead to less suffering for more people, then killing the innocent is not only permitted but positively commanded. This, according to Bishop Barron and John Paul II, is precisely what proportionalism allows, which, in turn, contradicts Catholic teaching on the existence of moral absolutes.

Proportionalists, however, reject the conflation of proportionalism with utilitarianism. Proportionalism, McCormick argues, is categorically different from utilitarianism because the former, unlike the latter, *does* uphold the existence of categorical moral prohibitions—actions that must never be done no matter what the circumstances or the intention of the actor. In the same article cited above, McCormick responds to what he takes to be *Veritatis Splendor*'s unfounded criticism of proportionalism, writing, "Not a single theologian would hold that a good intention could sanctify what has already been described as a morally wrong act. And that is what the encyclical says that proportionalists do. [Proportionalists] should both reject and resent that."[8]

So, where do things stand at this point? Bishop Barron, agreeing with *Veritatis Splendor*, criticizes proportionalism because it rejects moral absolutes. Yet proportionalists like McCormick *agree* with both Barron and John Paul II not only that moral absolutes exist but that individuals have a moral duty to abide by them. So where, then, is the dispute? Is this merely a misunderstanding? Has *Veritatis Splendor* misinterpreted and

8. McCormick, "Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*," 481–505, at 497.

misrepresented the proportionalists' position and thus deserved, as Fr. McCormick puts it, their "resentment"?

No. It is important to note, first, that John Paul II is widely regarded as one of the greatest papal theologians in the history of the Church. While that reputation does not protect him from making interpretive errors, it substantially raises the bar of credulity for the claim "The pope completely misunderstands proportionalism." Equally unlikely—both on character and probability grounds—is that the pope thought he could pull a fast one on the Church and the world by sneaking in an unfair critique of proportionalism that proportionalists would miss, ignore, or blithely forgive.

Secondly, recall that *Veritatis Splendor* upholds the perennial Catholic teaching, grounded both in natural law and revelation, that some actions are "intrinsically" evil, meaning they are never justified no matter what the individual's intentions (the goal she or he intends the act to accomplish), the individual's circumstances (what is happening to and/or around the individual while she or he is acting), or the act's actual outcome (the consequences of the action). Such prohibited actions include the deliberate killing of the innocent inside or outside the womb (murder), killing oneself (suicide, including voluntary euthanasia), having sexual relations with individuals of the same sex (sodomy), having sexual relations with individuals of the opposite sex before marriage (fornication) or with individuals one is not married to after marriage (adultery), having sexual relations with an individual against her or his will (rape), and, we could add for our own time, physically or chemically mutilating the bodies of gender-confused children (a form of child abuse).

It is crucial to note that John Paul II—again, entirely consonant with perennial Catholic teaching—does not hold that those who commit these or any other intrinsically evil acts necessarily have equal guilt in doing so. While circumstances and intentions are irrelevant for determining the morality of an action, they are

often, if not always, crucial for assessing the individual's *responsibility* for acting. It is equally important to emphasize John Paul II's insistence, also fully representative of Catholic doctrine, that Christ's forgiveness is inexhaustibly available for those who seek it, including those who have committed intrinsically evil acts. Yet these qualifications alter neither the category nor the substance of "intrinsically evil action" itself. There are some things, according to Catholic thought, that we are never permitted to do, no matter what.

Perhaps surprisingly, Fr. McCormick—in the very same article in which he criticizes the pope for misinterpreting proportionalism—states that he concurs with *Veritatis Splendor* on this fundamental point. He writes in apparent agreement with John Paul II's claim that the morality of an action is determined by its object (meaning what defines the action independently of intention and circumstance): "*Veritatis Splendor* insists that the morality of an act depends primarily upon the object rationally chosen. I think there is very little controversy on that general statement."[9]

The conflict does not, therefore, center on the *category* of "intrinsically evil" acts or the position that it is always wrong to perform an intrinsically evil act; indeed, McCormick even asserts that "once an action is said to be morally wrong, nothing can justify it."[10] The issue, rather, comes in the form of *who* gets to decide the substance of what defines intrinsically evil action. For John Paul II, it is the Church, appealing to universal natural law and divine revelation, who has the final say. For McCormick, in contrast, the ultimate authority is not the Church, but rather the individual. He argues that since even moral theologians (i.e., the "experts") cannot agree about which acts will always and without exception qualify as intrinsically evil, it is the *individual* who,

9. McCormick, 503–504.
10. McCormick, 500.

by appealing to her or his "experience," must determine what is right. He writes, "I know of no way to solve [the problem of moral disagreement] except by appeal to experience."[11] Doubling down on experience as the final arbiter of morality, McCormick ends the article by favorably quoting a group of French-Canadian moral theologians who sharply criticized *Veritatis Splendor* on the grounds that it limits "freedom of thought and expression," including on moral questions: "These limits [of freedom of thought and expression] come out of a notion of Church which really takes very little into account that the pursuit of truth, *moral questions included*, necessitates the participation of everyone. Frankly stated, as human persons and believers, we cannot proudly embrace the description proposed by the Encyclical of our role in the Church and the world."[12]

Although McCormick's proportionalist argument may sound like a compromise position—recognizing the validity of the category of intrinsically evil acts while leaving it to individuals' "experience," "freedom," and "participation" to determine whether any given act falls into that category in a particular context—proportionalism ultimately leads to the death of all moral absolutes. McCormick's argument pursues the following chain of reasoning:

1. Moral absolutes exist (there are intrinsically evil acts that must never be performed).

2. However, there is disagreement about the definition and moral authority of *specific* moral absolutes that cannot be resolved.

11. McCormick, 504.

12. McCormick, 506 (emphasis added).

3. Therefore, individuals should be able to appeal to their own "experience" to determine the definition and moral authority of specific moral absolutes in particular contexts.

It's not clear, however, how this position avoids self-contradiction: appealing to "experience" as an arbiter for moral disagreement is not consonant with moral absolutes because experiences can and do vary and, absent a universal rational standard to adjudicate them, cancel each other out. One person, for example, will "experience" that euthanizing himself is an unconscionable violation of the natural law, while another will claim that such an act is acceptable so long as it is motivated by "mercy"; one woman will experience the act of killing her unborn child as a horrific breach of God's will, while another will experience it as permissible, if not praiseworthy, so long as it helps her other children to afford an elite college education; and one set of parents will experience the act of providing "bottom surgery" for their child as a grotesque perversion of natural law, while another set will see it as empowering their child to "be themselves." On the grounds of experience alone, all of these individuals are correct, which means there is, ultimately, no moral absolute in play: if assisted suicide, abortion, and "gender-affirming care" can be both right and wrong depending on individuals' appeal to experience, then morality is nothing more than preference or taste—which is precisely what moral absolutes rule out.

It's not clear, moreover, how McCormick can maintain that even the *category* of "intrinsically evil acts" (and any corresponding moral absolute) survives rational scrutiny. Claiming that moral absolutes exist while concurrently insisting that individual experience is the arbiter of moral absolutes is analogous to claiming that God exists but only individual experience can determine the definition of God. Using this reasoning, one individual could, for example, experience God as identical to nature and another could experience him as beyond nature, and, by the

logic of this position, both would be right, even though those characteristics are contradictory. Permitting contrary definitions to occupy the same definitional category, however, renders the category meaningless. So, too, with the category of "moral absolutes": if "never killing innocent human beings" and "sometimes killing innocent human beings, depending on individual experience" are both potential interpretations of a "moral absolute," then the category collapses into nonsense.

Furthermore, saying, as McCormick does, that "once an action is said to be morally wrong, nothing can justify it" is an empty tautology, akin to declaring that "once something is said to be bad, nothing can say it is good." What ultimately matters, however, both theoretically and practically, is whether there is a *fixed* definition of right and wrong and good and bad. Proportionalism precludes the possibility of any fixed definition because of its appeal to experience, which ultimately renders it merely another variant of moral relativism.

In sum, John Paul II had it exactly right: proportionalism is, in the end, indistinguishable from run-of-the mill moral subjectivism or, if the individual's experience reflects his or her society's values, cultural relativism. Claiming that "intrinsically evil acts must never be done" while also claiming that "only experience can determine the definition and applicability of intrinsically evil acts" is to steal with one hand what has been given with the other. There's thus no splitting the difference on the question of moral absolutes. In the end, it is either option A (moral absolutes exist, and we can rationally—that is, universally—know them), or it is option B (moral absolutes do not exist, and we can rationally—that is, universally—know that they don't exist). If there is a possible exception to the absolute—especially if the ground for that exception is "experience"—then there is no absolute at all, no matter how many moral theologians would wish it otherwise.

Proportionalism is not the only foe to moral absolutes that *Veritatis Splendor* confronts. Writing near the end of the twentieth century, John Paul II was acutely aware of the growing threat to morality from the secular world as well, a problem he would directly confront two years later by promulgating the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*). Warning the world about the emergence of what he called "the culture of death," this later document specifically and unequivocally condemns abortion, euthanasia, and other violations of human dignity. His work in *Veritatis Splendor* is more theoretical and abstract, but no less essential. It reaffirms that Catholicism doesn't negotiate on the question of moral absolutes. God has imposed limits on action that no earthly power can legitimately contravene. That does not mean that people cannot and do not misuse their God-given freedom to break those laws. Yet every violation is just that: a violation. Nothing can turn what is intrinsically evil into anything other than evil, no matter what the experience, intention, or extenuating circumstances.

Are moral absolutes, in the end, the denial of human autonomy? Absolutely not, affirms John Paul II. To be free doesn't mean having the power to do what you want. It means having the freedom to do what you ought. It is to freely conform to the principles of action that God has given to us—not as a burden, punishment, or arbitrary set of restrictions, but rather as a gift: a sure roadmap for sanity, happiness, and peace in body, mind, heart, and soul. To muddle God's law with casuistic conceit may still get you tenure in some theology departments, but, as *Veritatis Splendor* prophetically reminds us, it won't get anyone to heaven.

The Splendor of Truth

Blessing

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Health and the Apostolic Blessing!

The splendor of truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator and, in a special way, in man, created in the image and likeness of God (see Gen. 1:26). Truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord. Hence the Psalmist prays: "Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord" (Ps. 4:6).

Introduction

JESUS CHRIST, THE TRUE LIGHT THAT ENLIGHTENS EVERYONE

1. Called to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, "the true light that enlightens everyone" (John 1:9), people become "light in the Lord" and "children of light" (Eph. 5:8), and are made holy by "obedience to the truth" (1 Pet. 1:22).

This obedience is not always easy. As a result of that mysterious original sin, committed at the prompting of Satan, the one who is "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44), man is constantly tempted to turn his gaze away from the living and true God in order to direct it towards idols (see 1 Thess. 1:9), exchanging "the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25). Man's capacity to know the truth is also darkened, and his will to submit to it is weakened. Thus, giving himself over to relativism and skepticism (see John 18:38), he goes off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself.

But no darkness of error or of sin can totally take away from man the light of God the Creator. In the depths of his heart there always remains a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it. This is eloquently proved by man's tireless search for knowledge in all fields. It is proved even more by his search for *the meaning of life*. The development of science and technology, this splendid testimony of the human capacity for understanding and for perseverance, does not free humanity from the obligation to ask the ultimate religious questions.

Rather, it spurs us on to face the most painful and decisive of struggles, those of the heart and of the moral conscience.

2. No one can escape from the fundamental questions: *What must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil?* The answer is only possible thanks to the splendor of the truth which shines forth deep within the human spirit, as the Psalmist bears witness: "There are many who say: 'O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord'" (Ps. 4:6).

The light of God's face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), the "reflection of God's glory" (Heb. 1:3), "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Consequently the decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself, as the Second Vatican Council recalls: "In fact, *it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man*. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of the future man, namely, of Christ the Lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love."[1]

Jesus Christ, the "light of the nations," shines upon the face of his Church, which he sends forth to the whole world to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (see Mark 16:15).[2] Hence the Church, as the People of God among the nations,[3] while attentive to the new challenges of history and to mankind's efforts to discover the meaning of life, offers to everyone the answer which comes from the truth about Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Church remains deeply conscious of her "duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the

1. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

2. See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

3. See *ibid.*, 9.

light of the Gospel, so that she can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual human questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related."[4]

3. The Church's Pastors, in communion with the Successor of Peter, are close to the faithful in this effort; they guide and accompany them by their authoritative teaching, finding ever new ways of speaking with love and mercy not only to believers but to all people of good will. The Second Vatican Council remains an extraordinary witness of this attitude on the part of the Church which, as an "expert in humanity,"[5] places herself at the service of every individual and of the whole world.[6]

The Church knows that the issue of morality is one which deeply touches every person; it involves all people, even those who do not know Christ and his Gospel or God himself. She knows that it is precisely *on the path of the moral life that the way of salvation is open to all*. The Second Vatican Council clearly recalled this when it stated that "those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his Church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience . . . can obtain eternal salvation." The Council added: "Nor does divine Providence deny the helps that are necessary for salvation to those who, through no fault of their own, have not yet attained to the express recognition of God, yet who strive, not without divine grace, to lead an upright life. For whatever goodness and truth is found in them is considered by

4. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

5. Paul VI, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (October 4, 1965), 1: *AAS* 57 (1965), 878; cf. Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967), 13: *AAS* 59 (1967), 263–264.

6. See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

the Church as a preparation for the Gospel and bestowed by him who enlightens everyone that they may in the end have life."[7]

THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT ENCYCLICAL

4. At all times, but particularly in the last two centuries, the Popes, whether individually or together with the College of Bishops, have developed and proposed a moral teaching regarding the *many different spheres of human life*. In Christ's name and with his authority they have exhorted, passed judgment, and explained. In their efforts on behalf of humanity, in fidelity to their mission, they have confirmed, supported, and consoled. With the guarantee of assistance from the Spirit of truth they have contributed to a better understanding of moral demands in the areas of human sexuality, the family, and social, economic, and political life. In the tradition of the Church and in the history of humanity, their teaching represents a constant deepening of knowledge with regard to morality.[8]

Today, however, it seems *necessary to reflect on the whole of the Church's moral teaching*, with the precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied. In fact, a new situation has come about *within the Christian community itself*, which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church's moral teachings. It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions. At the root of these

7. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

8. Pius XII had already pointed out this doctrinal development: see Radio Message for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII (June 1, 1941): *AAS* 33 (1941), 195–205. Also John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961): *AAS* 53 (1961), 410–413.

presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth. Thus the traditional doctrine regarding the natural law, and the universality and the permanent validity of its precepts, is rejected; certain of the Church's moral teachings are found simply unacceptable; and the Magisterium itself is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to "exhort consciences" and to "propose values," in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices.

In particular, note should be taken of the lack of harmony between the traditional response of the Church and certain theological positions, encountered even in Seminaries and in Faculties of Theology, with regard to questions of the greatest importance for the Church and for the life of faith of Christians, as well as for the life of society itself. In particular, the question is asked: do the commandments of God, which are written on the human heart and are part of the Covenant, really have the capacity to clarify the daily decisions of individuals and entire societies? Is it possible to obey God and thus love God and neighbor, without respecting these commandments in all circumstances? Also, an opinion is frequently heard which questions the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality, as if membership in the Church and her internal unity were to be decided on the basis of faith alone, while in the sphere of morality a pluralism of opinions and of kinds of behavior could be tolerated, these being left to the judgment of the individual subjective conscience or to the diversity of social and cultural contexts.

5. Given these circumstances, which still exist, I came to the decision—as I announced in my Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini*, issued on August 1, 1987, on the second centenary of the death of Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori—to write an Encyclical with the aim of treating "more fully and more deeply

the issues regarding the very foundations of moral theology,"[9] foundations which are being undermined by certain present day tendencies.

I address myself to you, Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, who share with me the responsibility of safeguarding "sound teaching" (2 Tim. 4:3), with the intention of *clearly setting forth certain aspects of doctrine which are of crucial importance in facing what is certainly a genuine crisis*, since the difficulties which it engenders have most serious implications for the moral life of the faithful and for communion in the Church, as well as for a just and fraternal social life.

If this Encyclical, so long awaited, is being published only now, one of the reasons is that it seemed fitting for it to be preceded by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which contains a complete and systematic exposition of Christian moral teaching. The Catechism presents the moral life of believers in its fundamental elements and in its many aspects as the life of the "children of God": "Recognizing in the faith their new dignity, Christians are called to lead henceforth a life 'worthy of the Gospel of Christ' (Phil. 1:27). Through the sacraments and prayer they receive the grace of Christ and the gifts of his Spirit which make them capable of such a life."[10] Consequently, while referring back to the Catechism "as a sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine,"[11] the Encyclical will limit itself to dealing with *certain fundamental questions regarding the Church's moral teaching*, taking the form of a necessary discernment about issues being debated by ethicists and moral theologians. The specific purpose of the present Encyclical is this: to set forth, with regard to the problems being discussed, the principles of a moral teaching based upon Sacred Scripture and the living Apostolic

9. Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini* (August 1, 1987): *AAS* 79 (1987), 1374.

10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1692.

11. Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* (October 11, 1992), 4.

Tradition,[12] and at the same time to shed light on the presuppositions and consequences of the dissent which that teaching has met.

12. See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 10.

CHAPTER I

"Teacher, what good must I do . . . ?"
(Matt. 19:16)

Christ and the Answer to the Question about Morality

"SOMEONE CAME TO HIM . . ." (MATT. 19:16)

6. *The dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man*, related in the nineteenth chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel, can serve as a useful guide *for listening once more* in a lively and direct way to his moral teaching: "Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'" (Matt. 19:16–21).[1]

7. "*Then someone came to him . . .*" In the young man, whom Matthew's Gospel does not name, we can recognize every person who, consciously or not, *approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality*. For the young man, the

1. See Apostolic Epistle *Parati Semper* to the Young People of the World on the occasion of the International Year of Youth (March 31, 1985), 2–8: *AAS* 77 (1985), 581–600.

question is not so much about rules to be followed, but *about the full meaning of life*. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion. This question is ultimately an appeal to the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life. Precisely in this perspective the Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of moral theology, so that its teaching would display the lofty vocation which the faithful have received in Christ,[2] the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart.

In order to make this "encounter" with Christ possible, God willed his Church. Indeed, the Church "wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life."[3]

"TEACHER, WHAT GOOD MUST I DO TO HAVE ETERNAL LIFE?" (MATT. 19:16)

8. The question which the rich young man puts to Jesus of Nazareth is one which rises from the depths of his heart. It is *an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every man*, for it is about the moral good which must be done, and about eternal life. The young man senses that there is a connection between moral good and the fulfillment of his own destiny. He is a devout Israelite, raised as it were in the shadow of the Law of the Lord. If he asks Jesus this question, we can presume that it is not because he is ignorant of the answer contained in the Law. It is more likely that the attractiveness of the person of Jesus had prompted within him new questions about moral good. He feels the need to draw near to the One who had begun his preaching with this new and decisive proclamation: "The time is fulfilled,

2. See Decree on Priestly Formation *Optatam Totius*, 16.

3. Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (March 4, 1979), 13: *AAS* 71 (1979), 282.

and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15).

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. Christ is the Teacher, the Risen One who has life in himself and who is always present in his Church and in the world. It is he who opens up to the faithful the book of the Scriptures and, by fully revealing the Father's will, teaches the truth about moral action. At the source and summit of the economy of salvation, as the Alpha and the Omega of human history (see Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13), Christ sheds light on man's condition and his integral vocation. Consequently, "the man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—must with his unrest, uncertainty, and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter him with all his own self; he must 'appropriate' and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself. If this profound process takes place within him, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deeper wonder at himself."[4]

If we therefore wish to go to the heart of the Gospel's moral teaching and grasp its profound and unchanging content, we must carefully inquire into the meaning of the question asked by the rich young man in the Gospel and, even more, the meaning of Jesus' reply, allowing ourselves to be guided by him. Jesus, as a patient and sensitive teacher, answers the young man by taking him, as it were, by the hand, and leading him step by step to the full truth.

4. *Ibid.*,10: *loc. cit.*, 274.

"THERE IS ONLY ONE WHO IS GOOD" (MATT. 19:17)

9. Jesus says: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:17). In the versions of the Evangelists Mark and Luke the question is phrased in this way: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18; see Luke 18:19).

Before answering the question, Jesus wishes the young man to have a clear idea of why he asked his question. The "Good Teacher" points out to him—and to all of us—that the answer to the question, "What good must I do to have eternal life?" can only be found by turning one's mind and heart to the "One" who is good: "No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18; see Luke 18:19). *Only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself.*

To ask about the good, in fact, *ultimately means to turn towards God*, the fullness of goodness. Jesus shows that the young man's question is really a *religious question*, and that the goodness that attracts and at the same time obliges man has its source in God, and indeed is God himself. God alone is worthy of being loved "with all one's heart, and with all one's soul, and with all one's mind" (Matt. 22:37). He is the source of man's happiness. Jesus brings the question about morally good action back to its religious foundations, to the acknowledgment of God, who alone is goodness, fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness.

10. The Church, instructed by the Teacher's words, believes that man, made in the image of the Creator, redeemed by the Blood of Christ, and made holy by the presence of the Holy Spirit, has as the *ultimate purpose of his life to live "for the praise of God's glory"* (see Eph. 1:12), striving to make each of his actions reflect the splendor of that glory. "Know, then, O beautiful soul, that you are *the image of God*," writes Saint Ambrose. "Know that you are *the glory of God* (1 Cor. 11:7). Hear how you are his

glory. The Prophet says: *Your knowledge has become too wonderful for me* (see Ps. 138:6, Vulg.). That is to say, in my work your majesty has become more wonderful; in the counsels of men your wisdom is exalted. When I consider myself, such as I am known to you in my secret thoughts and deepest emotions, the mysteries of your knowledge are disclosed to me. Know then, O man, your greatness, and be vigilant."[5]

What man is and what he must do becomes clear as soon as God reveals himself. The Decalogue is based on these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2–3). In the "ten words" of the Covenant with Israel, and in the whole Law, God makes himself known and acknowledged as the One who "alone is good"; the One who despite man's sin remains the "model" for moral action, in accordance with his command, "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2); as the One who, faithful to his love for man, gives him his Law (see Exod. 19:9–24 and 20:18–21) in order to restore man's original and peaceful harmony with the Creator and with all creation, and, what is more, to draw him into his divine love: "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12).

The moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man. It is a response of love, according to the statement made in Deuteronomy about the fundamental commandment: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children" (Deut. 6:4–7). Thus the moral life, caught up in the gratuitousness of God's love, is called to reflect his glory:

5. *Exameron*, Dies VI, *Sermo* IX, 8, 50: *CSEL* 32, 24.

"For the one who loves God it is enough to be pleasing to the One whom he loves: for no greater reward should be sought than that love itself; charity in fact is of God in such a way that God himself is charity."[6]

11. The statement that "There is only one who is good" thus brings us back to the "first tablet" of the commandments, which calls us to acknowledge God as the one Lord of all and to worship him alone for his infinite holiness (see Exod. 20:2–11). *The good is belonging to God, obeying him*, walking humbly with him in doing justice and in loving kindness (see Mic. 6:8). *Acknowledging the Lord as God is the very core, the heart of the Law*, from which the particular precepts flow and towards which they are ordered. In the morality of the commandments the fact that the people of Israel belongs to the Lord is made evident, because God alone is the One who is good. Such is the witness of Sacred Scripture, imbued in every one of its pages with a lively perception of God's absolute holiness: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:3).

But if God alone is the Good, no human effort, not even the most rigorous observance of the commandments, succeeds in "fulfilling" the Law, that is, acknowledging the Lord as God and rendering him the worship due to him alone (see Matt. 4:10). *This "fulfillment" can come only from a gift of God*: the offer of a share in the divine Goodness revealed and communicated in Jesus, the one whom the rich young man addresses with the words "Good Teacher" (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18). What the young man now perhaps only dimly perceives will in the end be fully revealed by Jesus himself in the invitation: "Come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21).

6. Saint Leo the Great, *Sermo* XCII, Chap. III: *PL* 54, 454.

"IF YOU WISH TO ENTER INTO LIFE, KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS" (MATT. 19:17)

12. Only God can answer the question about the good, because he is the Good. But God has already given an answer to this question: he did so *by creating man and ordering him* with wisdom and love to his final end, through the law which is inscribed in his heart (see Rom. 2:15), the "natural law." The latter "is nothing other than the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided. God gave this light and this law to man at creation."[7] He also did so *in the history of Israel*, particularly in the "ten words," the *commandments of Sinai*, whereby he brought into existence the people of the Covenant (see Exod. 24) and called them to be his "own possession among all peoples," "a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5–6), which would radiate his holiness to all peoples (see Wis. 18:4; Ezek. 20:41). The gift of the Decalogue was a promise and sign of the *New Covenant*, in which the law would be written in a new and definitive way upon the human heart (see Jer. 31:31–34), replacing the law of sin which had disfigured that heart (see Jer. 17:1). In those days, "a new heart" would be given, for in it would dwell "a new spirit," the Spirit of God (see Ezek. 36:24–28).[8]

Consequently, after making the important clarification: "There is only one who is good," Jesus tells the young man: "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:17). In this way, a close connection is made *between eternal life and obedience to God's commandments*: God's commandments show man the path of life and they lead to it. From the very lips of Jesus, the new Moses, man is once again given the

7. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In Duo Praecepta Caritatis et in Cecem Legis Praecepta. Prologus: Opuscula Theologica*, II, No. 1129, ed. Taurinen (1954), 245; see *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1955.

8. See Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, Q. 64: *PG* 90, 723–728.

commandments of the Decalogue. Jesus himself definitively confirms them and proposes them to us as the way and condition of salvation. *The commandments are linked to a promise*. In the Old Covenant the object of the promise was the possession of a land where the people would be able to live in freedom and in accordance with righteousness (see Deut. 6:20–25). In the New Covenant the object of the promise is the "Kingdom of Heaven," as Jesus declares at the beginning of the "Sermon on the Mount"—a sermon which contains the fullest and most complete formulation of the New Law (see Matt. 5–7), clearly linked to the Decalogue entrusted by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. This same reality of the Kingdom is referred to in the expression "eternal life," which is a participation in the very life of God. It is attained in its perfection only after death, but in faith it is even now a light of truth, a source of meaning for life, an inchoate share in the full following of Christ. Indeed, Jesus says to his disciples after speaking to the rich young man: "Every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29).

13. Jesus' answer is not enough for the young man, who continues by asking the Teacher about the commandments which must be kept: "He said to him, 'Which ones?'" (Matt. 19:18). He asks what he must do in life in order to show that he acknowledges God's holiness. After directing the young man's gaze towards God, Jesus reminds him of the commandments of the Decalogue regarding one's neighbor: "Jesus said: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 19:18–19).

From the context of the conversation, and especially from a comparison of Matthew's text with the parallel passages in Mark and Luke, it is clear that Jesus does not intend to list each and every one of the commandments required in order to "enter into

life," but rather wishes to draw the young man's attention to the *"centrality" of the Decalogue* with regard to every other precept, inasmuch as it is the interpretation of what the words "I am the Lord your God" mean for man. Nevertheless we cannot fail to notice which commandments of the Law the Lord recalls to the young man. They are some of the commandments belonging to the so-called "second tablet" of the Decalogue, the summary (see Rom. 13:8–10) and foundation of which is *the commandment of love of neighbor*: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19; see Mark 12:31). In this commandment we find a precise expression of *the singular dignity of the human person*, "the only creature that God has wanted for its own sake."[9] The different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections of the one commandment about the good of the person, at the level of the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor, and with the material world. As we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the Ten Commandments are part of God's Revelation. At the same time, they teach us man's true humanity. They shed light on the essential duties, and so indirectly on the fundamental rights, inherent in the nature of the human person."[10]

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; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness" are moral rules formulated in terms of prohibitions. These negative precepts express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage, private property, truthfulness, and people's good name.

9. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2070.

The commandments thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbor; at the same time they are the proof of that love. They are the *first necessary step on the journey towards freedom*, its starting-point. "The beginning of freedom," Saint Augustine writes, "is to be free from crimes . . . such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege, and so forth. When once one is without these crimes (and every Christian should be without them), one begins to lift up one's head towards freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom . . ."[11]

14. This certainly does not mean that Christ wishes to put the love of neighbor higher than, or even to set it apart from, the love of God. This is evident from his conversation with the teacher of the Law, who asked him a question very much like the one asked by the young man. Jesus refers him to *the two commandments of love of God and love of neighbor* (see Luke 10:25–27), and reminds him that only by observing them will he have eternal life: "Do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:28). Nonetheless it is significant that it is precisely the second of these commandments which arouses the curiosity of the teacher of the Law, who asks him: "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). The Teacher replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is critical for fully understanding the commandment of love of neighbor (see Luke 10:30–37).

These two commandments, on which "depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:40), are profoundly connected and mutually related. *Their inseparable unity* is attested to by Christ in his words and by his very life: his mission culminates in the Cross of our Redemption (see John 3:14–15), the sign of his indivisible love for the Father and for humanity (see John 13:1).

Both the Old and the New Testaments explicitly affirm that *without love of neighbor*, made concrete in keeping the commandments, *genuine love for God is not possible*. Saint John makes

11. *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 41, 10: *CCL* 36, 363.

the point with extraordinary forcefulness: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (John 4:20). The Evangelist echoes the moral preaching of Christ, expressed in a wonderful and unambiguous way in the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:30–37) and in his words about the final judgment (see Matt. 25:31–46).

15. In the "Sermon on the Mount," the *magna charta* of Gospel morality,[12] Jesus says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). Christ is the key to the Scriptures: "You search the Scriptures . . . and it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39). Christ is the center of the economy of salvation, the recapitulation of the Old and New Testaments, of the promises of the Law and of their fulfillment in the Gospel; he is the living and eternal link between the Old and the New Covenants. Commenting on Paul's statement that "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom. 10:4), Saint Ambrose writes: "end not in the sense of a deficiency, but in the sense of the fullness of the Law: a fullness which is achieved in Christ (*plenitudo legis in Christo est*), since he came not to abolish the Law but to bring it to fulfillment. In the same way that there is an Old Testament, but all truth is in the New Testament, so it is for the Law: what was given through Moses is a figure of the true law. Therefore, the Mosaic Law is an image of the truth."[13]

Jesus brings God's commandments to fulfillment, particularly the commandment of love of neighbor, *by interiorizing their demands and by bringing out their fullest meaning*. Love of neighbor springs from *a loving heart* which, precisely because it loves, is ready to live out *the loftiest challenges*. Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not

12. See Saint Augustine, *De Sermone Domini in Monte*, I, 1, 1: *CCL* 35, 1–2.

13. *In Psalmum CXVIII Expositio*, Sermo 18, 37: *PL* 15, 1541; see Saint Chromatius of Aquileia, *Tractarus in Matthaeum*, XX, I, 1–4: *CCL* 9/A, 291–292.

to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love (see Col. 3:14). Thus the commandment "You shall not murder" becomes a call to an attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one's neighbor. The precept prohibiting adultery becomes an invitation to a pure way of looking at others, capable of respecting the spousal meaning of the body: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, '*You shall not kill*; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' *But I say to you* that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. . . . You have heard that it was said, *'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you* that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28). *Jesus himself is the living "fulfillment" of the Law* inasmuch as he fulfills its authentic meaning by the total gift of himself: *he himself becomes a living and personal Law*, who invites people to follow him; through the Spirit, he gives the grace to share his own life and love and provides the strength to bear witness to that love in personal choices and actions (see John 13:34–35).

"IF YOU WISH TO BE PERFECT" (MATT. 19:21)

16. The answer he receives about the commandments does not satisfy the young man, who asks Jesus a further question. "I have kept all these; *what do I still lack?*" (Matt. 19:20). It is not easy to say with a clear conscience "I have kept all these," if one has any understanding of the real meaning of the demands contained in God's Law. And yet, even though he is able to make this reply, even though he has followed the moral ideal seriously and generously from childhood, the rich young man knows that he is still far from the goal: before the person of Jesus he realizes that he is still lacking something. It is his awareness of this insufficiency that Jesus addresses in his final answer. Conscious of *the young man's yearning for something greater, which would transcend a*

legalistic interpretation of the commandments, the Good Teacher invites him to enter upon the path of perfection: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21).

Like the earlier part of Jesus' answer, this part too must be read and interpreted in the context of the whole moral message of the Gospel, and in particular in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes (see Matt. 5:3–12), the first of which is precisely the Beatitude of the poor, the "poor in spirit" as Saint Matthew makes clear (Matt. 5:3), the humble. In this sense it can be said that the Beatitudes are also relevant to the answer given by Jesus to the young man's question: "What good must I do to have eternal life?" Indeed, each of the Beatitudes promises, from a particular viewpoint, that very "good" which opens man up to eternal life, and indeed is eternal life.

The Beatitudes are not specifically concerned with certain particular rules of behavior. Rather, they speak of basic attitudes and dispositions in life and therefore they *do not coincide exactly with the commandments*. On the other hand, *there is no separation or opposition* between the Beatitudes and the commandments: both refer to the good, to eternal life. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the proclamation of the Beatitudes, but also refers to the commandments (see Matt. 5:20–48). At the same time, the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates the openness of the commandments and their orientation towards the horizon of the perfection proper to the Beatitudes. These latter are above all *promises*, from which there also indirectly flow *normative indications* for the moral life. In their originality and profundity they are a sort of *self-portrait of Christ*, and for this very reason are *invitations to discipleship and to communion of life with Christ*.[14]

14. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1717.

17. We do not know how clearly the young man in the Gospel understood the profound and challenging import of Jesus' first reply: "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." But it is certain that the young man's commitment to respect all the moral demands of the commandments represents the absolutely essential ground in which the desire for perfection can take root and mature, the desire, that is, for the meaning of the commandments to be completely fulfilled in following Christ. Jesus' conversation with the young man helps us to grasp *the conditions for the moral growth of man, who has been called to perfection*: the young man, having observed all the commandments, shows that he is incapable of taking the next step by himself alone. To do so requires mature human freedom ("If you wish to be perfect") and God's gift of grace ("Come, follow me").

Perfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called. Jesus points out to the young man that the commandments are the first and indispensable condition for having eternal life; on the other hand, for the young man to give up all he possesses and to follow the Lord is presented as an invitation: "If you wish . . ." These words of Jesus reveal the particular dynamic of freedom's growth towards maturity, and at the same time *they bear witness to the fundamental relationship between freedom and divine law*. Human freedom and God's law are not in opposition; on the contrary, they appeal one to the other. The follower of Christ knows that his vocation is to freedom. "You were called to freedom, brethren" (Gal. 5:13), proclaims the Apostle Paul with joy and pride. But he immediately adds: "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (*ibid.*). The firmness with which the Apostle opposes those who believe that they are justified by the Law has nothing to do with man's "liberation" from precepts. On the contrary, the latter are at the service of the practice of love: "For he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, *'You shall not commit adultery; You*

shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'"* (Rom. 13:8–9). Saint Augustine, after speaking of the observance of the commandments as being a kind of incipient, imperfect freedom, goes on to say: "Why, someone will ask, is it not yet perfect? Because 'I see in my members another law at war with the law of my reason.' . . . In part freedom, in part slavery: not yet complete freedom, not yet pure, not yet whole, because we are not yet in eternity. In part we retain our weakness and in part we have attained freedom. All our sins were destroyed in Baptism, but does it follow that no weakness remained after iniquity was destroyed? Had none remained, we would live without sin in this life. But who would dare to say this except someone who is proud, someone unworthy of the mercy of our deliverer? . . . Therefore, since some weakness has remained in us, I dare to say that to the extent to which we serve God we are free, while to the extent that we follow the law of sin, we are still slaves."[15]

18. Those who live "by the flesh" experience God's law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom. On the other hand, those who are impelled by love and "walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God's Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out. Indeed, they feel an interior urge—a genuine "necessity" and no longer a form of coercion—not to stop at the minimum demands of the Law, but to live them in their "fullness." This is a still uncertain and fragile journey as long as we are on earth, but it is one made possible by grace, which enables us to possess the full freedom of the children of God (see Rom. 8:21) and thus to live our moral life in a way worthy of our sublime vocation as "sons in the Son."

15. *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 41, 10: *CCL* 36, 363.

This vocation to perfect love is not restricted to a small group of individuals. *The invitation*, "go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor," and the promise "you will have treasure in heaven," *are meant for everyone*, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, "Come, follow me," is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God. Both the commandments and Jesus' invitation to the rich young man stand at the service of a single and indivisible charity, which spontaneously tends towards that perfection whose measure is God alone: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus makes even clearer the meaning of this perfection: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

"COME, FOLLOW ME" (MATT. 19:21)

19. The way and at the same time the content of this perfection consist in the following of Jesus, *sequela Christi*, once one has given up one's own wealth and very self. This is precisely the conclusion of Jesus' conversation with the young man: "Come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21). It is an invitation the marvelous grandeur of which will be fully perceived by the disciples after Christ's Resurrection, when the Holy Spirit leads them to all truth (see John 16:13).

It is Jesus himself who takes the initiative and calls people to follow him. His call is addressed first to those to whom he entrusts a particular mission, beginning with the Twelve; but it is also clear that every believer is called to be a follower of Christ (see Acts 6:1). *Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality*: just as the people of Israel followed God who led them through the desert towards the Promised Land (see Exod. 13:21), so every disciple must follow Jesus, towards whom he is drawn by the Father himself (see John 6:44).

This is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves *holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father. By responding in faith and following the one who is Incarnate Wisdom, the disciple of Jesus truly becomes *a disciple of God* (see John 6:45). Jesus is indeed the light of the world, the light of life (see John 8:12). He is the shepherd who leads his sheep and feeds them (see John 10:11–16); he is the way, and the truth, and the life (see John 14:6). It is Jesus who leads to the Father, so much so that to see him, the Son, is to see the Father (see John 14:6–10). And thus to imitate the Son, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), means to imitate the Father.

20. *Jesus asks us to follow him and to imitate him along the path of love, a love which gives itself completely to the brethren out of love for God*: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The word "as" requires imitation of Jesus and of his love, of which the washing of feet is a sign: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14–15). Jesus' way of acting and his words, his deeds, and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him. It is *the "new" commandment*: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35).

The word "as" also indicates the *degree* of Jesus' love, and of the love with which his disciples are called to love one another. After saying: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12), Jesus continues with

words which indicate the sacrificial gift of his life on the Cross, as the witness to a love "to the end" (John 13:1): "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

As he calls the young man to follow him along the way of perfection, Jesus asks him to be perfect in the command of love, in "his" commandment: to become part of the unfolding of his complete giving, to imitate and rekindle the very love of the "Good" Teacher, the one who loved "to the end." This is what Jesus asks of everyone who wishes to follow him: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

21. *Following Christ* is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means *becoming conformed to him* who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (see Phil. 2:5–8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (see Eph. 3:17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the *effect of grace*, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

Having become one with Christ, the Christian *becomes a member of his Body, which is the Church* (see 1 Cor. 12:13, 27). By the work of the Spirit, Baptism radically configures the faithful to Christ in the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection; it "clothes him" in Christ (see Gal. 3:27): "Let us rejoice and give thanks," exclaims Saint Augustine speaking to the baptized, "for we have become not only Christians, but Christ. . . . Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ!"[16] Having died to sin, those who are baptized receive new life (see Rom. 6:3–11): alive for God in Christ Jesus, they are called to walk by the Spirit and to manifest the Spirit's fruits in their lives (see Gal. 5:16–25). Sharing in the *Eucharist*, the sacrament of the New Covenant (see 1 Cor. 11:23–29), is the culmination of our assimilation to Christ,

16. *Ibid.*, 21, 8: *CCL* 36, 216.

the source of "eternal life" (see John 6:51–58), the source and power of that complete gift of self, which Jesus—according to the testimony handed on by Paul—commands us to commemorate in liturgy and in life: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

"WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE" (MATT. 19:26)

22. The conclusion of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man is very poignant: "When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions" (Matt. 19:22). Not only the rich man but the disciples themselves are taken aback by Jesus' call to discipleship, the demands of which transcend human aspirations and abilities: "When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?'" (Matt. 19:25). *But the Master refers them to God's power*: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

In the same chapter of Matthew's Gospel (19:3–10), Jesus, interpreting the Mosaic Law on marriage, rejects the right to divorce, appealing to a "beginning" more fundamental and more authoritative than the Law of Moses: God's original plan for mankind, a plan which man after sin has no longer been able to live up to: "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). Jesus' appeal to the "beginning" dismays the disciples, who remark: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Matt. 19:10). And Jesus, referring specifically to the charism of celibacy "for the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 19:12), but stating a general rule, indicates the new and surprising possibility opened up to man by God's grace. "He said to them: 'Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it is given'" (Matt. 19:11).

To imitate and live out the love of Christ is not possible for man by his own strength alone. He becomes *capable of this love only by virtue of a gift received*. As the Lord Jesus receives the love of his Father, so he in turn freely communicates that love to his disciples: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (John 15:9). *Christ's gift is his Spirit*, whose first "fruit" (see Gal. 5:22) is charity: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Saint Augustine asks: "Does love bring about the keeping of the commandments, or does the keeping of the commandments bring about love?" And he answers: "But who can doubt that love comes first? For the one who does not love has no reason for keeping the commandments."[17]

23. "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). With these words the Apostle Paul invites us to consider in the perspective of the history of salvation, which reaches its fulfillment in Christ, *the relationship between the (Old) Law and grace* (the New Law). He recognizes the pedagogic function of the Law, which, by enabling sinful man to take stock of his own powerlessness and by stripping him of the presumption of his self-sufficiency, leads him to ask for and to receive "life in the Spirit." Only in this new life is it possible to carry out God's commandments. Indeed, it is through faith in Christ that we have been made righteous (see Rom. 3:28): the "righteousness" which the Law demands, but is unable to give, is found by every believer to be revealed and granted by the Lord Jesus. Once again it is Saint Augustine who admirably sums up this Pauline dialectic of law and grace: "The law was given that grace might be sought; and grace was given, that the law might be fulfilled."[18]

17. *Ibid.*, 82, 3: *CCL* 36, 533.

18. *De Spiritu et Littera*, 19, 34: *CSEL* 60, 187.

Love and life according to the Gospel cannot be thought of first and foremost as a kind of precept, because what they demand is beyond man's abilities. They are possible only as the result of a gift of God who heals, restores, and transforms the human heart by his grace: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The promise of eternal life is thus linked to the gift of grace, and the gift of the Spirit which we have received is even now the "guarantee of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14).

24. And so we find revealed the authentic and original aspect of the commandment of love and of the perfection to which it is ordered: we are speaking of a *possibility opened up to man exclusively by grace*, by the gift of God, by his love. On the other hand, precisely the awareness of having received the gift, of possessing in Jesus Christ the love of God, generates and sustains *the free response* of a full love for God and the brethren, as the Apostle John insistently reminds us in his first Letter: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. . . . We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:7–8, 11, 19).

This inseparable connection between the Lord's grace and human freedom, between gift and task, has been expressed in simple yet profound words by Saint Augustine in his prayer: *"Da quod iubes et iube quod vis"* (grant what you command and command what you will).[19]

The gift does not lessen but reinforces the moral demands of love: "This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as he has commanded us" (1 John 3:23). One can "abide" in love only by keeping the commandments, as Jesus states: "If you keep my

19. *Confessiones*, X, 29, 40: *CCL* 27, 176; see *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, XV: *PL* 44, 899.

commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10).

Going to the heart of the moral message of Jesus and the preaching of the Apostles, and summing up in a remarkable way the great tradition of the Fathers of the East and West, and of Saint Augustine in particular,[20] Saint Thomas was able to write that *the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ*.[21] The external precepts also mentioned in the Gospel dispose one for this grace or produce its effects in one's life. Indeed, the New Law is not content to say what must be done, but also gives the power to "do what is true" (see John 3:21). Saint John Chrysostom likewise observed that the New Law was promulgated at the descent of the Holy Spirit from heaven on the day of Pentecost, and that the Apostles "did not come down from the mountain carrying, like Moses, tablets of stone in their hands; but they came down carrying the Holy Spirit in their hearts . . . having become by his grace a living law, a living book."[22]

"LO, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE CLOSE OF THE AGE" (MATT. 28:20)

25. Jesus' conversation with the rich young man continues, in a sense, *in every period of history, including our own*. The question: "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" arises in the heart of every individual, and it is Christ alone who is capable of giving the full and definitive answer. The Teacher who expounds God's commandments, who invites others to follow him and gives the grace for a new life, is always present and at work in our midst, as he himself promised: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20). *Christ's relevance for people*

20. See *De Spiritu et Littera*, 21, 36; 26, 46: *CSEL* 60, 189–190; 200–201.

21. See *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 106, a. 1 conclusion and ad 2um.

22. *In Matthaeum*, Hom. I, 1: *PG* 57, 15.

of all times is shown forth in his body, which is the Church. For this reason the Lord promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, who would "bring to their remembrance" and teach them to understand his commandments (see John 14:26), and who would be the principle and constant source of a new life in the world (see John 3:5–8; Rom. 8:1–13).

The moral prescriptions which God imparted in the Old Covenant, and which attained their perfection in the New and Eternal Covenant in the very person of the Son of God made man, must be *faithfully kept and continually put into practice* in the various different cultures throughout the course of history. The task of interpreting these prescriptions was entrusted by Jesus to the Apostles and to their successors, with the special assistance of the Spirit of truth: "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16). By the light and the strength of this Spirit the Apostles carried out their mission of preaching the Gospel and of pointing out the "way" of the Lord (see Acts 18:25), teaching above all how to follow and imitate Christ: "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21).

26. In the *moral catechesis of the Apostles*, besides exhortations and directions connected to specific historical and cultural situations, we find an ethical teaching with precise rules of behavior. This is seen in their Letters, which contain the interpretation, made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, of the Lord's precepts as they are to be lived in different cultural circumstances (see Rom. 12–15; 1 Cor. 11–14; Gal. 5–6; Eph. 4–6; Col. 3–4; 1 Pet. and James). From the Church's beginnings, the Apostles, by virtue of their pastoral responsibility to preach the Gospel, *were vigilant over the right conduct of Christians*,[23] just as they were vigilant for the purity of the faith and the handing down of the divine gifts in the sacraments.[24] The first Christians, coming

23. See Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 26, 2–5: *SCh* 100/12, 718–729.

24. See Saint Justin, *Apologia*, I, 66: *PG* 6, 427–430.

both from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, differed from the pagans not only in their faith and their liturgy but also in the witness of their moral conduct, which was inspired by the New Law.[25] The Church is in fact a communion both of faith and of life; her rule of life is "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

No damage must be done to the *harmony between faith and life: the unity of the Church* is damaged not only by Christians who reject or distort the truths of faith but also by those who disregard the moral obligations to which they are called by the Gospel (see 1 Cor. 5:9–13). The Apostles decisively rejected any separation between the commitment of the heart and the actions which express or prove it (see 1 John 2:3–6). And ever since Apostolic times the Church's Pastors have unambiguously condemned the behavior of those who fostered division by their teaching or by their actions.[26]

27. Within the unity of the Church, promoting and preserving the faith and the moral life is the task entrusted by Jesus to the Apostles (see Matt. 28:19–20), a task which continues in the ministry of their successors. This is apparent from the *living Tradition*, whereby—as the Second Vatican Council teaches—"the Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that she is and all that she believes. This Tradition which comes from the Apostles, progresses in the Church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit."[27] In the Holy Spirit, the Church receives and hands down the Scripture as the witness to the "great things" which God has done in history (see Luke 1:49); she professes by the lips of her Fathers and

25. See 1 Pet. 2:12ff; cf. *Didache*, II, 2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, I, 6–9; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, I, 10; II, 10: *PG* 8, 3ff–364; 497–536; Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, IX, 8: *CSEL* 69, 24.

26. See Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Magnesios*, VI, 1–2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F.X. Funk, I, 234–235; Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 33:1, 6, 7: *SCh* 100/2, 802–805; 814–815; 816–819.

27. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 8.

Doctors the truth of the Word made flesh, puts his precepts and love into practice in the lives of her Saints and in the sacrifice of her Martyrs, and celebrates her hope in him in the Liturgy. By this same Tradition Christians receive "the living voice of the Gospel,"[28] as the faithful expression of God's wisdom and will.

Within Tradition, *the authentic interpretation* of the Lord's law develops, with the help of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who is at the origin of the Revelation of Jesus' commandments and teachings guarantees that they will be reverently preserved, faithfully expounded, and correctly applied in different times and places. This constant "putting into practice" of the commandments is the sign and fruit of a deeper insight into Revelation and of an understanding in the light of faith of new historical and cultural situations. Nevertheless, it can only confirm the permanent validity of Revelation and follow in the line of the interpretation given to it by the great Tradition of the Church's teaching and life, as witnessed by the teaching of the Fathers, the lives of the Saints, the Church's Liturgy, and the teaching of the Magisterium.

In particular, as the Council affirms, "*the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether in its written form or in that of Tradition, has been entrusted only to those charged with the Church's living Magisterium, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ*."[29] The Church, in her life and teaching, is thus revealed as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), including the truth regarding moral action. Indeed, "the Church has the right always and everywhere to proclaim moral principles, even in respect of the social order, and to make judgments about any human matter in so far as this is required by fundamental human rights or the salvation of souls."[30]

28. See *ibid*.

29. *Ibid*., 10.

30. *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 747, 2.

Precisely on the questions frequently debated in moral theology today and with regard to which new tendencies and theories have developed, the Magisterium, in fidelity to Jesus Christ and in continuity with the Church's tradition, senses more urgently the duty to offer its own discernment and teaching, in order to help man in his journey towards truth and freedom.