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Freedom and Responsibility: Reflections on Chapter II of Veritatis Splendor

Cover Page Footnote

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DAVID A. YOCIS

***Freedom and Responsibility:
Reflections on Chapter II of Veritatis Splendor***

When *Veritatis Splendor* was first published last fall, it was immediately recognized as one of the most significant Church documents since Vatican II, and as one of the major accomplishments of Pope John Paul's pontificate. The originality of the Pope's presentation of the moral life and the urgency with which he views the moral crisis in contemporary society give this encyclical a practical relevance rarely attained by ecclesiastical statements.

And yet, the more I have studied this encyclical, and especially its moral methodology — by which I mean its basic approach to morality and the fundamental principles of ethics, its concept of moral obligation, practical reasoning, and so on — the more I am struck by how little here is actually new. The moral methodology of *Veritatis Splendor* is not substantially different from that found in the documents of Vatican II. More than a third of the 184 footnotes in the encyclical refer to the conciliar documents, and many of the most striking passages in the encyclical are actually quotations from Vatican II. On the basic questions of fundamental moral theology, this document does not break new ground as much as it points out the middle of a well-traveled road.

The Pope phrases the basic question of morality which the methodology section of the encyclical tries to answer in this way: "How can obedience to universal and unchanging moral norms respect the uniqueness and individuality of the person and not represent a threat to his freedom and dignity?" (§85). In other words, the encyclical is seeking a middle ground between two extremes; or, perhaps better, it is trying to hold two opposites together at the same time. On the one hand, we have a distorted notion of human freedom as an end in itself, of individuals free to

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choose the moral values which they will uphold without reference to any objective standards of right and wrong. On the other hand, there is a distorted notion of obedience to God's law as blind acceptance of God's will more worthy of a flock of mindless sheep than of intelligent human beings.

John Paul seeks a middle course, or perhaps a creative synthesis, between freedom without objective right and wrong and obedience without respect for the dignity of the human person. He does so, not simply for the sake of balance, but mainly because he is convinced that human freedom and obedience to God are not opposed to each other but in fact need each other. This insight that freedom and obedience are in fact two sides of one coin is not original to John Paul. It pervades the entire Catholic approach to morality, and no one has developed this insight with more clarity and consistency than St. Thomas Aquinas. John Paul presents this encyclical not as his own personal opinion but as a faithful interpretation of the Thomistic and Catholic tradition which teaches the profound interrelationship between human nature and divine grace, between human reason and divine revelation, between human freedom and the law of God.

Of the two extreme positions to be avoided, the one which exalts freedom without a connection to divine wisdom is clearly the one which worries the Pope more, for the idea that morality is merely a matter of personal choice is rather common today. All the troublesome tendencies in moral theology which John Paul addresses in this document are in one way or another dependent upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the connection of freedom and truth.

The Notre Dame philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has written several influential works in recent years in which he analyzes the curious way in which we use moral language in our society today. For example, one person will say, "It is wrong to take innocent life directly; therefore abortion is wrong," while another person will say "It is wrong to deny a woman the right to choose an abortion." When both sides in this debate use the words "It is *wrong*," it appears that at least they agree on one thing: that there is something wrong *for everyone*, in and of itself regardless of what any individual may think about it; and that their opponents are mistaken

for thinking otherwise. We use words like “right” and “obligation” and “duty,” as though we believed that these are things that are outside ourselves that make claims upon us.

But we do not really *act* as if we considered our moral beliefs to be objectively true; we act as though the decision to be “pro-life” or “pro-choice” is a personal decision that is beyond discussion. In our society, morality, like politics and religion, is something that one does not discuss in public, for we assume that it is based on a private choice. How impolite of the Pope to bring up abortion on his trips to the United States, or capital punishment, or our responsibility to the poorer nations of the world! But it is impolite only when we are operating under the assumption that these are private issues and that no one ought to “impose” his or her views on such matters on someone else.

We can find this idea of morality as a personal choice not only in the broader society but also inside the Catholic Church. Moral theologians themselves occasionally presuppose this kind of freedom, as the Pope points out. But other, and better, examples can be found close to home. We are all familiar with those exercises in which we are given a list of persons, some of whom we allow to enter the nuclear war survival shelter and some of whom we decide are expendable. Or perhaps we are given a list of values like “honesty” and “friendship” and “compassion” and asked to rank them from highest to lowest priority. The assumption behind all of these exercises is that *there is no right answer*; they simply help us to get in touch with the basic values which we already hold. The question of *which* basic values we ought to hold is assumed to be a personal question.

Of course, our human understanding is limited, and so it is possible to agree that there is an objective right and wrong and still disagree about what it is. John Paul is extremely confident that, in the light of the Gospel, the Church can discern what the practical demands of morality are with certainty; in fact, he is much more confident than I am about this. But before we can discuss what morality actually requires of us, we must first recognize, in practice as well as in theory, that moral obligation is not something we choose but something which happens to us.

Morality is a matter of responsibility, literally: the ability to

respond to an obligation. And ultimately, the one to whom we are responding when we act morally is God, who made us in the divine image and likeness. Unlike the rest of creation, which has no choice but to follow the laws of nature, we human beings have been given the ability freely to choose to love God and to love our neighbor. God created us so that we could be like God by making a free choice to love. John Paul cites Vatican II quoting the Scripture: “God willed to leave man in the power of his own counsel, so that he would seek his Creator of his own accord” (§38 *et al*).

Therefore the freedom *from* external pressure and force is only a means to an end. We have been created with freedom to choose the morally good, to choose to love, to choose God, to choose to avoid those actions which are incompatible with the love of God (the so-called “intrinsically evil” acts). To use our freedom in any other way leaves us hollow. We must be left free from external constraints precisely so we can respond to the voice of God which commands us from within. There is no freedom without the obligation to be morally good, without the responsibility to use that freedom rightly.

But — and this needs also to be stressed — there is no responsibility without freedom. God does not desire our blind obedience but our free obedience, for God created us as human beings with intelligence and free will. When we act in a morally right way, St. Thomas says, we are more like God (who chooses freely to love), *and* we are more fully human. We are *both* more subject to God’s will *and* more free, more self-possessed when we make right moral decisions. This is why no human authority can compel conscience, and why the freedom of religion is, as John Paul says, “the foundation of the cumulative rights of the person” (§31). We are truly free when we submit to the truth of our being, but we can only make that submission if we are truly free.

Thus *Veritatis Splendor* is not, as some of its detractors maintain, a papal attempt to “lay down the law” or to take away the freedom of conscience of Catholics. By recalling the intrinsic connection between freedom and truth, and by pointing out how this connection has been obscured today by society and even within the Church, John Paul intends to call both Church and society to the really authentic freedom which seeks to know what is true and to

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do it. For, as Jesus says, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

Thus, when John Paul quotes St. Augustine as saying, “In the house of the Lord, slavery is free” (§87), he is not engaging in doublespeak but is expressing a paradox which is at the heart of Christian faith. One can look to Mary, the model of Christian discipleship, who by her “Yes” to God both affirmed her status as a servant of God (“I am the handmaid of the Lord”) and at the same time fully expressed what human freedom can be. One can look to the martyrs, who followed Christ crucified in holding fast to the truth even to the point of death, and thus bore witness to the strength of human freedom and of God’s grace.

C.S. Lewis once remarked that the saints are all unique individuals, while the tyrants and mass murderers of history are all depressingly the same. This is a consistent element of the Catholic vision of our relationship to God, which says that human freedom and growth is not in opposition to obedience to God and to the moral law, but that the two in fact presuppose one another. This is the heart of the vision of morality which Pope John Paul is asking the Church to live in our present age.