

A Discussion of Various Points Contained in the
Encyclical Veritatis Splendor
(The Splendor of Truth)

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On August 6, 1993, Pope John Paul II, Vicar of Christ, Successor of Peter, gave to the Bishops of the Catholic Church and from them, to the world, the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. In this encyclical, John Paul II does not address a specific moral issue, but rather, explains the basis for Catholic moral teaching. This paper reflects on 4 specific points raised by John Paul.

Point 1 - "Come follow me" (Mt 19:21) (Chapter 1, page 32)

We all have a calling - an invitation by Christ to come to Him. The three word calling by Christ can be said to contain three distinct elements. Those elements are choice, role, and direction. The words of Christ to the young rich man are certainly an invitation, not a command. But it is more than a calling to an occupation as a disciple; it is a choice in life. We choose to come or not to come. How will one respond? It is an exercise of free will; an exercise, which reflects and defines one's very character. It can be a choice for Christ or against Christ. A non-choice is not possible. A non-choice is only temporary. One can only prudently postpone so long before making such a decision. A non-choice will eventually lead one away from Christ, in effect rejecting Christ's call. Christ himself said, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." (Luke 11:23) It is not a single choice, nor is it permanent choice. It is a daily choice. Sometimes it is an hourly choice. In the moments of temptation, we choose second by second either for Christ or for ourselves. Depending on the choice, the choice can result in "a sin unto death" (1 John 5:16), and cause separation from God. We do not by our own choices overcome temptation; rather our choices allow the grace of God to flow through us, enabling our actions. God provides all the graces we need to overcome sin. His graces are sufficient for all. Probably most of us have heard the oft-told story about cooking a frog in boiling water. If one tosses a live frog in boiling water, the frog will jump out. If one places the frog in room temperature water and slowly increases the temperature, the frog will unknowingly allow himself to be cooked to death. There would be a great uproar if today's culture was forced upon any previous US society, even the 60's. By making a decision, we make a choice. God's grace has a chance to enter that decision. Even if the wrong decision is made, the memory is established and the conscience can slowly eat away one's defenses and expose one's heart to oneself. By not making a decision, the conscience is not activated. Grace may not flow in. In fact the conscience may slowly corrupt over time. The heart will become hardened. . This is why the non-choice is so devastating. The conscience must be activated while it is healthy.

The second element is role. Not only is Christ calling us, but He is calling us to follow Him. We are the creature, God is the Creator. Our role is to follow, not to lead. We are not equal. We are not partners. If God chooses to walk beside us, or, for that matter, carry us, that is His choice, not ours. The most common examples of the correct followers of Christ are those of sheep and that of children (e.g. Mt 18:3, Mt 25:33). This child-like, sheep-like aspect of our Christian walk is not to be mistaken as that of blind ignorance. God gave us reason, which we are to use. We are not to foolishly follow the flock and fall off a cliff, nor thoughtlessly walk into a busy intersection as a child might do. We are to use the reason, and free will given to us. A father takes great delight in the accomplishments of his children. Isn't the high school graduation, not only a delight to the parents, but also an honoring of those parents? So too our heavenly Father takes delight in His adopted children's accomplishments. Our accomplishments honor the Father. It is an assent of Faith that we are called to when we follow Christ. It is knowing that we are deliberately following Christ that is the essence of that assent of faith. It is by acknowledging His authority that we are led to follow.

The third element is direction. Who or what are we following? Is it Christ or is it I? Is it money, illicit sex, drugs, power, or even excitement that we seek? In the end all of the "whats" that we follow, are in reality a "who". When we pursue money, illicit sex, drugs, etc. we are choosing ourselves over God. We are saying we know what is better for ourselves. It is the same choice the angels made. It is the same choice that Adam and Eve made. Do we choose God or do we choose ourselves? Choosing ourselves is turning away from God. Turning away from God is the simplest and perhaps most succinct definition of sin.

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Fortunately for us, the words of Christ, "Come follow me", was not a one-time event. Christ's call is made continuously. Until the moment of death, it is never too late to respond. Our response is fragile. Only by the grace of God can we maintain a positive response. Jesus knows how difficult it is for man. His graces can be obtained in numerous ways, such as prayer, fasting, or by reading His word. However, Jesus, in His wisdom and love, additionally gave us additional grace in the form of the sacraments, the fullest expression of which is the Eucharist. Christ said "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." (John 6: 56) By giving us His flesh, Jesus has enabled us to share in His graces, His very life. He has given us the nourishment to "Come follow Him".

Point 2 - "Seeking What is Good and True" (Chapter 2, Page 79)

Garbage in, garbage out. Garbage in, garbage out. How many times have we heard this expression in regards to computers. If the information entered into the computer is faulty, incomplete, or downright wrong, then we can only expect that an erroneous result will occur. In this case, what is true for computers is unfortunately true for the conscience of man. It is truly the age of communication. We are bombarded by movies, telephones, books, television, radio, newspapers, e-mail, the internet, etc. etc. These communications could be a tremendous opportunity to spread truth and gain understanding. Unfortunately this is seldom the case.

We live in a society flooded with faulty, incomplete and, at times downright wrong information. This information is garnered, interpreted, and cataloged by our brain as part of our human experience. As a result the conscience of many is skewed from the truth. Bad information is not the only source of the problem. For the past half century, there has been placed tremendous value on the worth of the individual. Certainly, all individuals possess value, a value arising out of their creation in the image of God. Unfortunately, modern American culture has come to interpret the person's value as arising from the individual.

Most people are taught that they must obey their conscience. To many, man is the source of knowledge about what is good and evil. When man is the arbiter and source of what is right and wrong ("I know what is right for me" syndrome), there is no balance. There is no opportunity to grow in understanding. The value of the conscience is limited. For the conscience to grow in understanding, truth must flow in. As much as we would like it, we cannot just put on headphones and absorb the wisdom of the ages while we sleep. Unfortunately, we must seek knowledge. It is an action we must actively take. We must then use our reason to discern the validity of the knowledge.

Seeking blindly does not help. One needs direction. Where does one find knowledge? How often I have made myself the arbiter of truth without really a basis of truth. In making decisions about moral values, it is far too easy to listen to the world, the media, the university professor, peer groups, etc. The advice of others can be useful, but without knowing the basis for their advice, one is left without confidence in the conclusion. Thus, the basis of the knowledge is critical. Some Christians rely solely on the Bible for their interpretation of truth. While this sounds like a notable idea, the concept collapses when we look at the results. Scripture while beneficial to all who read it, is not self-revealing. If this were true, then all who privately interpret would be led to the same truth, as there is but one truth. There exists over 30,000 different denominations of Protestants. Each boasting that their version of the truth is in fact true. There can be only one truth.

Then where do we turn? We know from scripture that the Church is "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). We know that Jesus promised the apostles that He "would send him (the Paraclete)... when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth." (John 16:7-13). We know historically, that the Catholic Church is the Church founded by Christ. We know that Jesus promised that "the gates of Hell would not prevail" against His Church (Mt 16:18), so the Church was promised permanence. Thus we are left with the Catholic Church, being promised by Christ, as the earthly means with which Christ would continue to spread His truth. Therefore, in matter of faith and morals, it becomes imperative, that one seek the counsel of God's word in the teaching of His Church. Guided with this information we can truly seek "What is Good and True".

**Point 3 - "It is not licit to do evil that good may come from it"
Chapter II, page 100**

To the modern world, it all seems so reasonable.

"Why would anyone let a dying man suffer. There is no chance for recovery. Why go through the pain? Let the man end his life now and go to join God in the afterlife. He's suffered enough. He will need your help."

"You're pregnant? You have great potential. Your career will be over. You can children later in life if you want. It's your body anyway. Be sensible. Have an abortion."

"Look I know you want to do the right thing. But you'll never get this project completed if you don't work with the system. No one likes doing it but sometimes you've got to grease the wheels to get the project approved. Kickbacks are just a hidden part of the budget."

"Not use contraceptives? How archaic! Are you nuts or something?"

"We are going to move in together. We want to make sure it works, before we think about marriage. Besides I'm in love with him. I can't stand to be without him. I just don't share your sexual mores. This is the 22nd Century, you know!"

"I know he favors abortion. But I am a teacher, and if I don't vote for that person, then my students will not get the programs they need."

And on, and on, and on. And there stands the Church. At times a lonely figure, waiving her finger, saying, "No, No, No!". Can the Catholic Church be so out-of-line? So archaic?

Call it what you want – teleologism, proportionalism, or consequentialism. Much of modern society believes in it. The end effect is what counts. How you get there is your business. I know many people who think that way. Many are the nicest people you would want to meet. They seem bright. Many are even Catholics. Why is this?

Partly, because teleologism is true! Well at least some of the time. Consider the following. It is World War II. German soldiers approach your house. You are hiding Jews in the basement. They ask if you have seen any Jews. If you tell the truth, the Jews you are housing will be sent to the concentration camps. So you choose to lie. This would be the right thing to do. But an evil has been performed in order to achieve a good. Therefore, there are no absolute moral norms! This example is not my own, nor is the conclusion my own, but rather comes from a book entitled Why Be Good by Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin, Ph.D. Obviously, it is correct and even noble to tell a lie in this situation. The evil of the lie is far outweighed by the good of preserving the lives of the Jews in the household. Proportionalism is a valid approach to this moral dilemma. However, because telling the truth may not be an absolute moral norm, it does not mean that there are not any absolute moral norms. Why, because telling the truth is apparently not an absolute norm, would rape, murder, abortion, idolatry, etc. no longer be moral norms. To use an old saying, "Don't throw out the baby with the bath water."

So many fall for this false logic. To be honest, some fall because they do not attempt to think through the issue. They are led along blindly. I have done that many times. I believe there is a more fundamental issue – a lack of trust in God. When one aborts one's child in order to produce what one believes is a good, the individual is in effect saying, "I don't trust God. God will not provide for me (and my baby)". In the example given above concerning the kickbacks necessary to advance the project, maybe one wouldn't get the contract, but that may be God's plan for you. Maybe you are to move in a different direction. In choosing a way other than God's, we are saying that we know more than God. We are back to the Garden of Eden. We must listen to the source of truth in this world, the church led by the Spirit in

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truth, the Catholic Church. We must base the foundations of our conscience on the teachings of the Church.

Point 4 - The service of moral theologians (Chapter 4, Page 131)

“Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes”
(Matthew 11:25)

I was formed in the 50's. Television parents were wise. Matt Dillon was tall, strong, and moral. He did the right thing, no matter who was against him. As Catholics, we had Marian devotions, lines for confession, Eucharistic Adoration, and full seminaries. But our world was about to change. We were just beginning to enter into the communication age. The influence of the media, computers, the internet, etc. would soon flood our world. The mindset and the agenda of a relatively few people would reach into the households of the world. Who would have thought that a Bishop (Fulton Sheen) would outdraw Milton Berle on television. Now if one would see a Bishop on TV, one would assume it is a fallen Bishop, or else at least one talking about fallen priests. Unfortunately the good effects of the 50's didn't last. The decade of the 50's was followed by the dissenting decade of the 60's. “Trust no one over 30 years of age”. Everyone had his/her own way of thinking. We were entering a new age of enlightenment, or so we thought.

We were not alone in feeling the influence. The Church, after all, is comprised of humans. How could one think the Church wouldn't be affected? It wasn't, and isn't. Theologians took up the role of the dissenter. Many said, “The pope's morality is out-of-date.” “It is the individual's judgment that matter.” “The Pill is OK.” “It is okay to sleep with your lover, if you love her/him.” “No one is going to Hell.” “Teachers must have academic freedom, especially in regards to theistic and moralistic concepts.” Everyone seemed so eager to show the Bible as a book of flaws. No one knows who wrote what, much less when. Divine inspiration is a poor substitute for modern man's intellect and creativity. My own brother went to a Catholic University and was taught that the Bible is merely propaganda. One of my sons went to the same university only to discover that Jesus never knew He was the messiah.

Fortunately, history tells us that when society swings from one extreme to another, the pendulum will eventually come back to the middle. As Catholics, we have more than history to tell us this is true, we have God's promise. “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) We are promised that the Church will never go astray. And again, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you.” (John 14:16). This promise of the truth is not given to individual priests, bishops, or laity (except in the case of the successor of Peter who possesses the keys to the kingdom). It remains with Peter and the Magisterium. It is to Peter and the Apostles (and thereby their successors) that Christ gives the authority “to bind and to loose”. Jesus tells His disciples whom He calls and sends out into Samaria, “He who hears you, hears me.” (Luke 10:16) Because of this, we know that those in the Church that Christ calls to spread His message will likewise be guided in truth. How fortunate we are to have this gift. A Presbyterian friend of mine asked me the other day, if I were worried that the Church would go astray, and begin to support various ways of the world. How glad I was to say, “No, Scripture tells us that it will not happen”.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, we see the workings of the Spirit, drawing the Church members to the law of Christ. When heresy occurs, the Church is bound to tell the Truth. As with the various heresies over the centuries, the misguidance of some moral theologians has led the Successor of Peter to definitively authoritatively express the true basis for morality. John Paul II, as the Vicar of Christ states, “the Church's Magisterium also teaches the faithful specific particular precepts and requires that they consider them in conscience *as morally binding*.” (p 133). Later he states, “Dissent in the form of carefully orchestrated protests and polemics carried in the media, is opposed to ecclesial communion and to a correct understanding of the hierarchical constitution of the People of God. Opposition to the teaching of the

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Church's Pastor's cannot be seen as a legitimate expression either of Christian freedom or of the diversity of the Spirit's gifts." (page 136)

It has been 19 years since John Paul II wrote his encyclical. It would be unrealistic to think that everyone would just fall in line. But have things really changed? Driving down the highway the other day, I saw a billboard Womenpriests.org and another Cath4choice.org. Organized political dissent is still present. Looking at the recent scandal with priests and pedophilia (a topic I do not wish to go into), were not some bishops guilty of teleologism? It is evident that some bishops were more concerned with the end effect of saving the face for the Church, then they were of the welfare of those they were shepherding.

I have discussed Veritatis Splendor with a young priest. Yes, they did study it in the seminary. That is a start. Truth will sink in. Perhaps things will change with the next generation of priests. But what hasn't happened, is that the encyclical has not made it to the pulpit. Priests seldom discuss the basis for morals at Mass. Few Catholics will become educated about absolute norms versus proportionalism, or consequentialism, unless they are taught. Kerygma and Didache are to be presented in the homily. So it is reasonable to use the pulpit to teach when possible.

Again, let us look at a particular moral issue, contraception. So many Catholics practice contraception, as I once did. While it is true that the Church teaches that contraception is evil, the priests do not -- at least not in public. Even in private, I was always told by priests to use my conscience. I have heard one sermon in my life address contraception. Even then, the priest seemed to be apologetic about presenting the topic. The priests seem to be afraid of angering the members. They have forgotten that truth draws people, not repels. Certainly, if not presented clearly, the priests could alienate some members. I believe a major part of the problem is that the reasons against contraception have not been explained well to the priests, much less the public. Other moral issues, such as abortion, in vitro fertilization, cloning, public execution, etc. are not addressed, or if addressed, the moral basis is not explained. While admittedly, a 15-20 minute time frame for the homily limits the depth of any presentation, I am also sure that completely ignoring the issue is not the solution. The Mass remains a focal point for instruction of the members in the parish. I am a physicist working in the field of medicine, primarily radiation therapy and diagnostic radiology. In nuclear medicine one injects an isotope of radioactive material into the patient. The radioactive compound is designed to accumulate in selected parts of the body. A special camera detects the radiation. At first the image is not clear, but as time goes on and more and more information is gathered, an image begins to appear. Eventually, even a complex image can appear. Is morality so much different? While perhaps a full treatment cannot be given of a particular difficult topic, a word here and a word there can gradual build-up a complete picture of the truth. Certainly it is true, the laity also have the responsibility to seek out the truths of their faith. Nonetheless, the clergy need to stimulate and direct the laity, for the laity are the lambs, the clergy are the shepherds; the laity are the children, the clergy are the fathers.

So for now, as a member of the laity, I will pray for the continuing courage and holiness of the Pontiff as he directs Christ's flock. I will pray that the complete message of Christ and His Church be proclaimed. For my part, I am now trying to learn the doctrines of the Church on a deeper adult level and hope that I will be able to assist my parish/archdiocese some day in explaining the Faith.