

Veritatis Splendor in focus: 1

Revelation versus dissent

Germain Grisez

Exceptional interest and comment have been aroused by Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, on the Church's moral teaching. It will be examined in a *Tablet* series which begins this week. Professor Germain Grisez holds the Flynn Chair in Christian ethics at Mount St Mary's College, Maryland.

The descriptive title of Pope John Paul II's new encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, indicates its subject matter: "De fundamentis doctrinae moralis Ecclesiae (On the foundations of the Church's moral teaching)". And speaking directly to the bishops, to whom the document as a whole is addressed, the Pope is more specific: "Each of us knows how important is the teaching which represents the central theme of this encyclical and which is today being restated with the authority of the Successor of Peter." That central theme, he continues, is: "the reaffirmation of the universality and immutability of the moral commandments, particularly those which prohibit always and without exception intrinsically evil acts" (115).

The Pope addresses his brother bishops, he says, "in obedience to the word of the Lord who entrusted to Peter the task of strengthening his brethren" (115). The Pope and the bishops are "facing what is certainly a genuine crisis" (5). For "a new situation has come about within the Christian community itself . . . It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine" (4).

The encyclical does not deal with specific kinds of acts, such as contraception or abortion, homosexual behaviour or adultery. Rather, it examines and finds wanting dissenting views that attempt to find a way around some or all of the precepts which exclude those or other acts as always wrong.

As the foundation for his criticism of such dissent, the Pope recalls that faith includes specific moral requirements. The encyclical's whole first chapter unfolds the significance of Jesus' dialogue with the rich young man described in chapter 19 of Matthew's gospel. Here the Pope finds Jesus reaffirming as God's word some specific requirements which everyone must meet if he or she is to be saved.

These requirements are not arbitrary: "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' " and so on, formulated as prohibitions, "express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage" (13), and so on. Moreover, "Jesus shows that the commandments are not to be under-

stood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey toward perfection, at the heart of which is love" (15). While perfection is far more, "one can 'abide' in love only by keeping the commandments" (24).

The encyclical points out that God has communicated the same moral requirements both as natural law, by giving human persons understanding of what is right and wrong, and as revealed truth. Since grace perfects human nature, Christian morality, while going beyond natural law, always includes it. "From the very lips of Jesus, the new Moses, man is once again given the commandments of the Decalogue" (12). Indeed, Jesus' "way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life" (20).

That is why the requirements of natural law are included in the Gospel, so that "the Gospel is 'the source of all saving truth and moral teaching' " (28).

While the encyclical's first chapter provides an inspiring articulation of the Gospel's teaching about following Jesus, its second chapter takes up and criticises four ways in which various dissenters have tried to soften received moral teaching about intrinsically evil acts.

One way is to affirm that Christians must love their neighbour and respect everyone's dignity but to deny that love and respect always forbid "intrinsically evil acts" — such as killing the innocent and adultery. Of course, proponents of this view can say that murder and adultery are wrong provided "murder" means unjust killing and "adultery" means unchaste or irresponsible intercourse involving someone married to a third party. But until some moralists began looking for ways around the precepts forbidding intrinsically evil acts, no Jew or Christian ever gave the fifth and sixth commandments so vacuous an interpretation. A more substantive defence of this view asserts that specific prohibitions result from "biologism" or "naturalism" (47), i.e., from confusing what is naturally given with what morally ought to be.

In replying, the Pope recalls the Church's definitive teaching on the human person's unity and argues: since the human person "entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, the primordial moral re-

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quirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods" (48), such as bodily life and marital communion.

Ultimately, however, attempts to limit Christian morality's requirements to generalities such as love and respect are rejected by the Pope on the ground that they are "contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition" (49). He quotes St Paul's condemnation (in 1 Cor. 6.9-10) of "certain specific kinds of behaviour the wilful acceptance of which prevents believers from sharing in the inheritance promised to them" (49), and recalls Trent's use of the same passage against a view somewhat like the one rejected here.

A second way around the precepts forbidding intrinsically evil acts is to treat them as sound guidelines, but mere guidelines, for conscience. On this view, only conscience can decide whether an act bad in general might be appropriate in a concrete situation. The Pope's reply is that this view mistakenly treats conscience as a creative decision rather than as a judgment following from moral truths, including negative precepts which oblige in every case (see 56). Once more, the Pope appeals to St Paul, this time to Rom. 2:15, which "clarifies the precise nature of conscience: it is a moral judgment about man and his actions, a judgment either of acquittal or of condemnation, according as

human acts are in conformity or not with the law of God written on the heart" (59).

Certain theories of fundamental option provide a third way of softening the impact of precepts excluding intrinsically evil acts. Though such acts may be intrinsically wrong, doing them in particular cases, even with full awareness and deliberate consent, need not reverse one's option for the good and for God, and so need not be mortal sin.

The Pope rejects such theories as incon-

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sistent with the make-up of the acting person. But even before doing so, he rejects them as "contrary to the teaching of Scripture itself, which sees the fundamental option as a genuine choice of freedom and links that choice profoundly to particular acts" (67). The "choice of freedom" which "Christian moral teaching, even in its biblical roots, acknowledges" as fundamental is "the decision of faith . . .

the obedience of faith (cf. Rom. 16:26)" by which (again quoting Vatican II's constitution on divine revelation) "man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals'" (66). Since faith is a commitment to covenantal communion with God, which is to bear fruit in works, it entails the specific requirements of the Decalogue, reaffirmed by Jesus as conditions for entering the Kingdom.

The fourth and final way by which many dissenting moralists circumvent traditional teaching is by flatly denying that the precepts forbidding certain kinds of acts as intrinsically evil really are exceptionless. Proportionalists or consequentialists maintain that one cannot always tell that an act excluded by such a precept would be morally evil without taking into account, in the actual circumstances, the greater good or lesser evil which it might bring about. They maintain that the foreseen proportions of "pre-moral" or "ontic" goods to bads in the available alternatives can require an exception even to such precepts as the fifth and sixth commandments, as traditionally understood.

Against these theories, the Pope points out "the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of evaluating all the good and evil consequences and effects — defined as pre-moral — of one's own acts" (77). He goes on to argue that the morality of human acts depends on their "object", which, being "a freely chosen kind of behaviour" . . . is "the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person" (78). But the objects of certain kinds of acts are at odds with "the goods safeguarded by the commandments" (79). Thus: "Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature 'incapable of being ordered' to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church's moral tradition, have been termed 'intrinsically evil' (*intrinsece malum*): they are such always and *per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances" (80).

But, once again, the Pope's critique finally invokes revelation: "In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture" (81). Two texts are cited, Rom. 3:8 and (once more) 1 Cor. 6:9-10. The former first appears in a quotation from St Thomas (in 78), then in the heading to sections 79-83, and finally in a quotation from *Humanae Vitae* 14, where Paul VI taught that "it is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom. 3:8)" (80). Finally, John Paul also teaches: "The doctrine of the object as a source of morality represents an authentic explication of the biblical morality of the Covenant and of the commandments" (82).

In chapter three, the Pope develops a further consideration: "The unacceptability of 'teleological', 'consequentialist' and 'proportionalist' ethical theories, which

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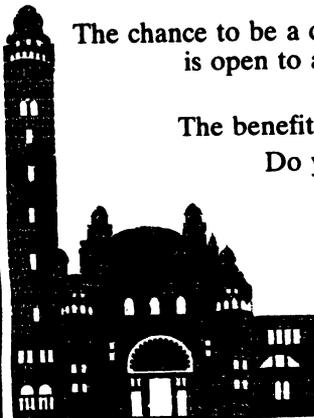
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deny the existence of negative moral norms regarding specific kinds of behaviour, norms which are valid without exception, is confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom" (90). If there were ways around exceptionless moral norms, many martyrs could have survived. The encyclical affirms that in raising such martyrs "to the honour of the altars, the Church has canonised their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances, and the refusal to betray those commandments, even for the sake of saving one's life" (91).

Confronted with the encyclical's criticisms of the various ways around received teaching regarding intrinsically evil acts, dissenting theologians undoubtedly will respond that the Pope has misinterpreted them, missed them altogether, and/or found no new or convincing arguments against their views. Such responses, however, will not suffice. For, even if one granted that the encyclical's analyses and arguments from reason are inadequate, its main point and its arguments from revela-

engage in extramarital intercourse unchastely or irresponsibly. Any attempt to interpret God's word as allowing such exceptions would imply that for millennia the moral truth which God meant to communicate was radically misunderstood — that God failed to communicate effectively. God, however, cannot have failed to communicate effectively.

Moreover, if the view that the commandments admit exceptions were correct, the whole body of believers would have been mistaken until almost today. But ever since Pentecost it has been true that the Holy Spirit is permanently present in the Church, so that "the universal body of the faithful . . . cannot be mistaken in belief . . . in matters of faith and morals" (109, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 12). Consequently, the rejection of the Pope's interpretation of Scripture is implicitly inconsistent with any Catholic conception of divine revelation and its transmission.

Those who nevertheless continue to dissent no doubt will take comfort from the fact that the encyclical never so much as mentions the magisterium's infallibility. I think, however, it would be a mistake to interpret this silence as a concession to the view that the received teaching about intrinsically evil acts falls outside the scope of infallibility. For one thing, *Donum Veritatis*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1990 instruction concerning theologians' role in the Church, recalled the magisterium's infallibility not only in general but also specifically in moral matters. The present encyclical, in the passage quoted just above from *Lumen Gentium* 12, refers, though without using the word, to the infallibility of the whole Church in matters of morals.

More important, however, is that John Paul II by no means weakens past claims for the authority of the moral teaching he reaffirms in this encyclical. While nowhere treating the magisterium's infallibility, he everywhere teaches that the exceptionlessness of the relevant norms is a revealed truth — that is, a truth demanding from every Catholic the assent of faith. Thus, the appeal is to God's authority in revealing, which is the source of the Church's infallibility in believing and the magisterium's authority in teaching.

Theologians who have been dissenting from the doctrine reaffirmed in this encyclical now have only three choices: to admit that they have been mistaken, to admit that they do not believe God's word, or to claim that the Pope is grossly misinterpreting the Bible. No doubt, many will make the third choice. In doing so, they will greatly escalate the conflict which has divided the Catholic Church during the past 30 years.

In claiming that the received teaching concerning intrinsically evil acts is a revealed truth, the Pope also implicitly asserts that it is definable. That implicit assertion will be denied by those rejecting the teaching. This argument is undeniably over essentials, and cannot long go unresolved. It cannot be settled by theologians. Only the magisterium's definitive judgment will settle it.

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tion would remain intact. Its main point, in effect, is that passages such as 1 Cor. 6:9-10 mean exactly what they say: those who do certain kinds of acts, such as adultery and sexual perversion, will not inherit the Kingdom — assuming, of course, that the sin, committed with full awareness and deliberate consent, remains unrepented. The Pope makes it clear that, though the "magisterium does not intend to impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one", he "has the duty to state that some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations are incompatible with revealed truth" (29).

Dissenting moralists, of course, will reply that the prohibitions found in Scripture are less absolute than they seem. But that reply will contradict the encyclical which, referring to "the moral commandments expressed in negative form in the Old and New Testaments", teaches: "Jesus himself reaffirms that these prohibitions allow no exceptions" (52).

No doubt that will be denied by some Scripture scholars. However, until recent times, when some Jewish and Christian theologians began denying that there are intrinsically evil acts, no Jew or Christian ever imagined that "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery" mean no more than that one may not kill the innocent without a proportionate reason or

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