

‘To omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ’

Last month we looked at St John Paul II’s Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* [VS]. Facing a crisis in the transmission of traditional moral doctrine, the Pope reaffirmed the absoluteness of God’s Law. He wrote: ‘We not infrequently witness the fearful plunging of the human person into situations of gradual self-destruction. According to some, it appears that one no longer need acknowledge the enduring absoluteness of any moral value.’ (VS 84)

Embracing the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* is crucial for moral health in the Church. True, *belief* in moral absolutes doesn’t guarantee *obedience* to those absolutes. But the dilution of even the belief, which had spread among some theologians, makes it still easier to rationalise sin, for both priests and people. So: once someone thinks that no type of action is evil *by its nature* (that is, intrinsically evil) and therefore that an act of any type – e.g. blasphemy, adultery, killing the innocent – might possibly be justified with sufficient ‘good intentions’ or ‘special circumstances’; or, that conscience can make so-called ‘decisions’ about moral questions (cf. VS 61) without subjecting itself to objective moral truth; or, that someone can supposedly maintain a ‘fundamental option’ for God, remaining in his grace and on the path to heaven, even while freely and knowingly committing a grave violation of his law – all these things open wide the door to moral corruption.

Those who had departed from traditional doctrine were sometimes motivated by wanting to pastorally assist those struggling to keep the moral law. In this regard, Pope John Paul had spoken in *Familiaris Consortio* [FC] of the distinction between the ‘law of gradualness’ (which is a legitimate concept) and ‘gradualness of the law’ (which is not legitimate).

Giving people pastoral guidance respects that they progress gradually in understanding and doing the good. However, the Pope wrote, this “‘law of gradualness” or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with “gradualness of the law,” as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations.’ People cannot ‘look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy.’ (FC 34) So: the law *itself* isn’t different for them in their earlier stage of progress. No one can justifiably say, ‘The harder commandments don’t apply to me just yet; I’ll keep them a bit later on, when I’m stronger or circumstances are better.’

Veritatis Splendor reaffirmed: ‘It would be a very serious error to conclude that the Church’s teaching is essentially only an “ideal” which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated... This is what is at stake: the *reality* of Christ’s redemption. *Christ has redeemed us!* This means that he has given us the possibility of realising *the entire* truth of our being...’ (VS 103)

The distinction between the ‘law of gradualness’ and ‘gradualness of the law’ also helps us understand the harmony between *Veritatis Splendor* and Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* [AL], which some have incorrectly set in opposition to each other. Some years back we looked in depth at aspects of *Amoris Laetitia*, refuting the claim that it departed from previous Church teaching. Pope Francis’ teaching is especially in the context of this ‘law of gradualness’.

He explained: ‘Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called “law of gradualness”...This is not a “gradualness of law” but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law.’ (AL 295) The reference here, he clarifies, is to those who lack full knowledge or who lack the ability in the circumstances to give fully free consent (cf. AL 273; 301-302; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1735) – full knowledge and freedom being conditions required in Catholic teaching for sin to be mortal (in addition to grave matter).

Pope Francis continued, ‘The law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace...’ (AL 295) So, by God’s grace we can always avoid knowingly and freely committing sin. Pope John Paul likewise taught: ‘Keeping God’s law in particular situations can be difficult, extremely difficult, but it is never impossible’ (VS 102) – a point being, we can’t blame God for our deliberate sins by saying that he commanded something impossible or that he didn’t make enough grace available.

Regarding those who do lack full knowledge, Pope Francis exhorts that ‘every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience’. (AL 303) ‘What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God...Given that gradualness is not in the law itself’, he reaffirms, ‘this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church.’ (AL 300) Again, the supposed clash between the teachings of Pope Francis and Pope John Paul II vanishes.

The Pontifical Council for the Family under Pope John Paul restated a principle in its handbook for confessors that guiding someone to moral truth is best a gradual process especially if it is foreseen that the individual, confronted with the full explanation of the truth in their present state, would be more likely simply to move from ignorant good faith into conscious mortal sin. (cf. *Vademecum for Confessors* 3.8 (1997)) Along these lines, we look out for optimal moments to lead a person forward into full Gospel truth – though obviously not postponing forever: the final goal is always to share the whole of God’s saving message.

St John Paul refuted the stock accusation that it is ‘unloving’ for the Church to proclaim moral absolutes. He wrote: ‘The Church, one hears, is lacking in understanding and compassion...In fact, genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good, for his authentic freedom. And this does not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God’s eternal Wisdom...’

‘Still, a clear and forceful presentation of moral truth can never be separated from a profound and heartfelt respect, born of that patient and trusting love which man always needs along his moral journey, a journey frequently wearisome on account of difficulties, weakness and painful situations. The Church can never renounce the principle of truth and consistency, whereby she does not agree to call good evil and evil good; she must always be careful not to break the bruised reed or to quench the dimly burning wick (cf. *Is* 42:3).’ (VS 95)

And he quoted Pope St Paul VI (*Humanae Vitae* 29): “‘While it is an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ, this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ himself showed by his conversations and dealings with men. Having come not to judge the world but to save it, he was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners”.’ (VS 95)