

The Splendour of Truth

Today's Feast of the Transfiguration is the 30th anniversary of St John Paul II's Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 'The Splendour of Truth' (6th August 1993) – its topic: 'On Certain Fundamentals of the Church's Moral Teaching'. Recent Church documents are often published on feast days connected with their message, so its dating was not by chance. We are not to live lives conformed to the world; rather, we must allow Christ to transfigure us.

Faced with 'a genuine crisis', the 'systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine' with divergent positions 'encountered even in Seminaries and in Faculties of Theology', (4-5) the Pope reaffirmed the absoluteness of God's law. Paraphrasing his message: not every moral question reduces to shades of grey – some answers *are* black-and-white. Truth does not 'box in' our freedom. Rather, truth *sets us free* (cf. *Jn* 8:32) – to be the people God created us to be.

The encyclical opens by declaring: 'The splendour 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.' Drawing upon the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man, (*Mt* 19:16-21) the Pope luminously sets forth the foundations of morality. He writes: 'To ask about the good... ultimately means to turn towards God, the fullness of goodness... 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".' (9)

'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, striving to make each of his actions reflect the splendour of that glory.' (10)

The Pope explains the source of the natural law, recognised by conscience. 'Only God', he says, '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, 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". (St Thomas Aquinas) He also did so in the history of Israel, particularly in the "ten words", the commandments of Sinai...' (12)

Jesus reaffirms these, telling the young man, 'If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' (*Mt* 19:17) But he invites him to a higher level: 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions... then come, follow me.' (*Mt* 19:21) 'Following Christ', the Pope writes, 'is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.' This '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.' (19) 'Jesus asks us to follow him and to imitate him along the path of love.' (20) Love is our reason for keeping the commandments. (22)

'Love and life according to the Gospel cannot be thought of first and foremost as a kind of precept' – a rule to follow – 'because what they demand is beyond man's abilities.' (23) But as St Paul teaches, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.' (*Rom* 5:5) The New Law of the Gospel written on our hearts 'is the grace of

the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ.’ (24) Grace and charity are given especially in the Sacraments, configuring us to Christ in the depths of our being. (21)

The encyclical’s central section confronts four broad errors: (i) a false opposition between freedom and God’s law; (ii) a false understanding of conscience that divorces it from moral truth; (iii) a false theory that individual grave sins might not change our ‘fundamental option’ for God; and (iv) an incorrect denial of there being types of action that are ‘intrinsically’ evil, always evil of their nature regardless of ‘special circumstances’ or supposed good intentions.

Regarding conscience, the Pope explains how this always operates in subordination to truth. ‘Conscience is not an infallible judge; it can make mistakes.’ (62) Sometimes the resulting evil is without blame on our part, if we are in a state of invincible ignorance. ‘But even in this case’, he states, ‘it does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good.’ (63)

In the words of St John Henry Newman: ‘Conscience has rights because it has duties.’ (34) Yes, we must always follow what in conscience we believe to be the truth. But this presupposes we have made a proportionate effort to *find out* the truth. The Pope (64) quotes Vatican II: ‘In forming their consciences the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth.’ (*Declaration on Religious Freedom* 14) And he warns, ‘Before feeling easily justified in the name of our conscience, we should reflect on the words of the Psalm: “Who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults” (*Ps* 19:12). There are faults which we fail to see but which nevertheless remain faults, because we have refused to walk towards the light.’ (63)

Rejecting theories of ‘fundamental option’ according to which someone might supposedly commit deliberate serious sin yet still remain in God’s grace at some deeper level, the Pope writes: ‘With every freely committed mortal sin, [man] offends God as the giver of the law...He loses sanctifying grace, charity and eternal happiness.’ (68) ‘Mortal sin exists...when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered...The fundamental orientation can be radically changed by particular acts...This can occur in a direct and formal way, in the sins of idolatry, apostasy and atheism; or in an equivalent way, as in every act of disobedience to God’s commandments in a grave matter.’ (70)

Most emphatically, the Pope reaffirmed that some types of action are *intrinsically* evil – evil of their very nature – and so ‘never...defensible as a choice’ (81) regardless of circumstances or intentions. Blasphemy, adultery, and killing the innocent are a few examples; the Pope gives many. (80-81) We may not ‘do evil that good may come’. (78; cf. *Rom* 3:8) Morality is not just about weighing foreseeable consequences: we must look firstly at the very nature of the act by which it is proposed to achieve the desired consequences. The martyrs knew they had to accept the consequence of death rather than commit the intrinsic evil of denying their faith. (90-94)

Pope John Paul concludes by turning to Mary, (120) who ‘understands sinful man and loves him with a Mother’s love. Precisely for this reason she is on the side of truth and shares the Church’s burden in recalling always and to everyone the demands of morality. Nor does she permit sinful man to be deceived by those who claim to love him by justifying his sin, for she knows that the sacrifice of Christ her Son would thus be emptied of its power. No absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life.’