

Confronting the array of erroneous and misleading teachings and interpretations in the field of moral theology that have plagued the Church for the past several decades, *Veritatis Splendor* encapsulates in one text the whole of the Church's conception of morality. It is a moral masterpiece which will enable the Church to root itself more firmly in the way set out by Jesus Christ himself.

- Crisis in morality

With this encyclical, the Holy Father definitively addresses the crisis that currently exists in contemporary Catholic morality. The teachings of the Magisterium — so often presented to be out of touch with real life or in discord with the more “appealing” moral theories proposed by dissident theologians — are given in this encyclical their solid foundations in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the whole of God's law.

It is no wonder that in directly addressing the bishops of the Church, John Paul II strongly reasserts the Church's mandate to authoritatively articulate and teach the fundamental moral principles of the faith which he claims “transcends all eras and cultures.” Morality remains constant through all generations because it comes from God. Bishops, he writes, have “a grave obligation to be personally vigilant to insure that the faithful are guarded from every doctrine and theory contrary to official Church teaching.”

- Simplicity of Christ's way

Much of contemporary society has worked to undermine the moral teachings of the Church. Not only has Catholic moral teaching been portrayed as too complicated a topic for most to comprehend, but it has been heralded as impossible to practice as well! In this

encyclical, the Holy Father succinctly points to the inherent simplicity of Catholic morality. Living a good moral life is, he asserts, “to follow Jesus, abandon one's self to Him, allow one's self to be transformed by His grace and mercy.” This is surely the core of the Gospel message. Learning the truth, embracing the truth, living the truth — these actions will indeed lead one to the fullness of freedom and personal fulfillment in Christ. The truth will indeed set us free.

The text of *Veritatis Splendor* is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter is a theological and spiritual meditation centered on the parable of the rich young man. “What must I do to gain eternal life?” is the question asked by all desiring to follow Jesus and his Way. Christ's response clearly manifests the understanding that the Law — embodied most specifically in the Ten Commandments — remains throughout the ages the *fundamental basis for the moral life*. Living these Commandments faithfully is understandably challenging. The Pope recognizes the many obstacles confronting the individual — particularly those imposed by a culture and society so steeped in materialistic and secularistic concerns. Nevertheless, our duty to live these Commandments faithfully, he claims, remains valid “time and time again.”

The second chapter centers on a more technical and intricate ethical analysis of those criteria which in fact make a moral act good or evil. John Paul II decisively responds to the contemporary moral and ethical interpretations that are clearly inconsistent with Church doctrine. These he summarizes and addresses in three major divisions:

- The individualist ethic

1. Some moral theories want to emphasize that human freedom can never be constrained by any externally imposed law. *Veritatis Splendor* makes it clear that the Law of God and human freedom can never truly *be* in conflict. Both are created, ordained and desired by God. *Far* from creating their own values, human freedom and human reason are called to discover the divine law that is inherent in the order of the universe created by God. Discovering this divine moral law actually makes a person more free to truly fulfill oneself. Divine moral law is the only road to true human freedom. Only by one's participation in this divine law can the human person hope to discover the harmony, happiness and fulfillment toward which the human person longs. The pope is clearly condemning the rather prevalent “individualistic ethic” that would make human freedom an absolute.

- Formation of conscience

2. Another erroneous tendency in contemporary moral theology and practice holds the individual's conscience to be the sole moral truth. While Catholic moral teaching never denies the freedom and dignity of the individual conscience (“Each individual has the right to be respected in his own journey,” the pope writes), *Veritatis Splendor* clearly articulates the need for the conscience to be *properly formed*. A right conscience is one that has been led by the light and guidance of the Church's moral teaching to be free from ignorance and error. One cannot simply appeal to conscience when in many instances it has been inadequately or erroneously formed. A properly formed conscience far transcends one's subjective opinion or personal judgment which has become for many the measuring stick in making moral choices.