

Why is *Veritatis Splendor* a controversial encyclical?

Dlaczego *Veritatis splendor* jest kontrowersyjną encykliką?

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Abstract: This article seeks to answer essentially one question: why and in what sense is *Veritatis Splendor* a controversial encyclical? Applying the hermeneutic method, which attempts to read the text in light of the tradition in which it is embedded and its subsequent reception, the paper provides three answers. The first reason why *Veritatis Splendor* is controversial is that it is part of a history of strong moral-theological controversies. The second answer concerns its reception: on the one hand, it provoked reactions of strong criticism in various ecclesial circles; on the other, the relationship with the subsequent Magisterium (especially *Amoris laetitia*) must be correctly interpreted. The third answer is no longer located outside the encyclical but within it. In fact, in chapter two, the encyclical becomes intentionally controversial because it confronts, in its work of discernment, certain tendencies in moral theology today. The conclusion attempts to interpret *Veritatis Splendor* more broadly. Its profound intention is to be grasped in proposing a broad and liberating vision of morality, at once Christological and rational, in obedience to the conciliar legacy and mandate.

Keywords: *Veritatis Splendor*; Magisterium; Moral Theology; Controversy

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu odpowiedzieć zasadniczo na jedno pytanie: dlaczego i w jakim sensie *Veritatis splendor* jest encykliką kontrowersyjną? Pierwszą odpowiedzią jest fakt, że wpisuje się ona w historię silnych kontrowersji moralno-teologicznych. Druga odpowiedź wiąże się z jej odbiorem: z jednej strony wywołała reakcje silnej krytyki w różnych kręgach kościelnych; z drugiej strony należy poprawnie zinterpretować jej związek z późniejszym Magisterium (zwłaszcza *Amoris laetitia*). Trzecia odpowiedź nie znajduje się już poza encykliką, ale w niej samej. W rzeczywistości, w rozdziale drugim, encyklika staje się celowo kontrowersyjna, ponieważ konfrontuje się, z pewnymi tenden-

cjami w dzisiejszej teologii moralnej. Zakończenie podejmuje próbę bardziej rozbudowanej interpretacji *Veritatis splendor*. Jej głęboka intencja ma być uchwycona w propozycji szerokiej i wyzwalającej wizji moralności, jednocześnie chrystologicznej i racjonalnej, w posłuszeństwie soborowemu dziedzictwu i mandatowi.

Słowa kluczowe: *Veritatis splendor*; Magisterium; teologia moralna; kontrowersje

Introduction

Twenty years ago, when I was a student in Rome, I had the good fortune of participating in a conference on the tenth anniversary of *Veritatis Splendor* at the “John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute”. The opening lecture at that important event was given by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. He began his speech by apologizing for not being able to draft a written text, but only having prepared a set of notes. Therefore, he had to speak off the cuff. I remember very well how I admired not only his mastery of the Italian language, but also the lucidity and coherence of a thought that went to the essentials (Ratzinger 2004).

Not being Ratzinger and not possessing the breadth of his thought, I intend this paper to answer basically one question: why and in what sense is *Veritatis Splendor* a controversial encyclical? In order to answer this question in a non-simplistic way, I will give a multi-level answer. Rather than wondering about the range of controversial issues, that is, providing a list of issues, I wish to merely ask why *Veritatis Splendor* is controversial. In doing so, I hope that its sense of relevance will emerge as well as the message it addresses to moral theologians.

I. *Veritatis Splendor* is faced with a crisis

The first answer as to why *Veritatis Splendor* is controversial is because it is part of a history of strong moral-theological controversies. What is controversial is the relationship it reveals between magisterial teaching and moral theologians and between different tendencies or moral-theological schools around the time of the renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council.

I will briefly recall only the first aspect, that is, the relationship between magisterial teaching and moral theologians, particularly in light of *Humanae vitae*. In this encyclical, Paul VI, recalling “the moral doctrine on marriage constantly taught by the Magisterium of the Church” (HV 6) reiterated that “sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive” (HV 14) is intrinsically dishonest. In doing so Paul VI refers to the mandate of the Magisterium,

as the authentic guardian and interpreter “of the whole moral law, not only, that is, of the law of the Gospel but also of the natural law” (HV 4). *Humanae vitae* represents a real turning point, a milestone (cf. Fumagalli 2019, 5), in the relationship between the Magisterium and moral theologians. Indeed, in a very strong way, it led to a public and ecclesial dissent about a teaching proposed with such authority. From this moment, it could be said, the relationship between the Magisterium and moral theologians became controversial, as will be seen also in the reception of other ecclesial documents, e.g., *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*¹.

Veritatis Splendor has become part of this history that is now marked by a latent or open conflict between the Magisterium and theologians, as well as by a great variety of moral-theological proposals in conflict with each other (think only of the conflict between “autonomous ethic” and “faith ethic”). But, in my opinion, it is necessary to situate *Veritatis Splendor* in a broader and more fundamental context. In fact, John Paul II is aware that it was not just a matter of responding to this or that contestation, to this or that ethical-theological current; for him it was the teaching of the Church that was being globally challenged². This is clear from the very first pages of the encyclical. For this reason, the encyclical intends to reflect on “certain aspects of doctrine,” and on “certain fundamental questions” (no. 5), but not in a fragmentary way. His perspective is global: “it seems necessary to reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching” since it experiences “an overall and systematic calling into question [...] on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions” (n. 4). The particular aspects of the Pope’s intervention, especially in chapter 2, should therefore be interpreted in light of the concern to adequately reflect on the very foundations of moral theology³. This is because – the encyclical states it *apertis verbis* – we are faced with “a genuine crisis” (no. 5).

We are thus facing an unprecedented situation which the Pope describes by the word “crisis”. Speaking of the loss of sin, already *Reconciliatio et pae-*

¹ This especially with respect to the teaching on the existence of intrinsically evil acts and the distinction between venial and mortal sin (cf. nos. 17-18).

² Cf. John Paul II 1986: “l’uomo non è più convinto che solo nella verità può trovare la salvezza. La forza salvifica del vero è contestata, affidando alla sola libertà, sradicata da ogni obiettività, il compito di decidere autonomamente ciò che è bene e ciò che è male. Questo relativismo diviene, nel campo teologico, sfiducia nella sapienza di Dio, che guida l’uomo con la legge morale”.

³ Cf. *VS*, 5: “Gien these circumstances, which still exist, I came to the decision – as I announced in my Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini*, issued on 1 August 1987 on the second centenary of the death of Saint Alphonsus Maria de’ Liguori – to write an Encyclical with the aim of treating «more fully and more deeply the issues regarding the very foundations of moral theology», [Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini* (August 1, 1987): *AAS* 79 (1987), 1374] foundations which are being undermined by certain present day tendencies”. Announced in 1987, *Veritatis Splendor* was only published in 1993. Vidal 1994, 31-32, reconstructs its different redactions.

nitentia, denounced “the grave spiritual crisis looming over humanity today”⁴. This awareness is decisive and makes the encyclical particularly relevant, since today we are very much aware that we are in a multi-level crisis. Indeed that we are even prey to a permanent crisis. Not surprisingly, according to the American Collins Dictionary, “permacrisis” is the word that best represents 2022⁵.

In this regard, Alasdair MacIntyre’s diagnosis of the situation of moral philosophy in his famous *After Virtue* comes to mind⁶. According to him, because of complex events, moral philosophy is experiencing a foundational crisis that prevents it from having a shared language and understanding. Something similar perhaps is envisaged by *Veritatis Splendor*. There is an awareness that we are in a crisis that no longer allows us to reference a common conceptual framework. While MacIntyre identified the root of the crisis of moral philosophy in the loss of the *telos*, that is, of the finality, and therefore of the unity of human life, John Paul II identifies the root to lie in the tendency to detach “human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth” (no. 4)⁷. We will return to this point later.

For now, I want to emphasize how the reference to the crisis clearly shows that John Paul II’s concern must not be reduced to academic issues around

⁴ Cf. ReP, no. 18: “The restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today.”

⁵ “Crisis” is a very suitable hermeneutical category to designate the current ethical situation. The concept has origins in the agricultural world: at first it indicated the sifting after the harvest. It then takes on a judicial meaning (judgment, sentence) and a medical meaning (the climax of an illness that can lead to healing or death). Today we talk about different crises (ecological crisis, economic crisis, social crisis, etc...), but at the basis of each of them is a highly unstable situation that has in it elements of risk and danger, and at the same time opportunity. The question is whether there can be a permanent crisis, that is, one that does not evolve into a situation (positive or negative) of relative stasis.

⁶ Imagine a catastrophe: public opinion blames scientists, books and laboratories are destroyed; Know-Nothing political movement takes power, scientific teaching is abolished. When the wind changes and attempts are made to bring science back to life, only fragments remain: parts of theories, individual experiments, nothing more; the context, the general reference, is missing. Something similar has happened to morality and its language. “The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality” (MacIntyre 2007, 2). This thesis includes the fact that such a catastrophic situation is not recognized except by a small minority, and that it is the result not of a few shocking events, but of a long and complex process.

⁷ See also no. 84: “The *fundamental question* which the moral theories mentioned above pose in a particularly forceful way is that of the relationship of man’s freedom to God’s law; it is ultimately the question of the *relationship between freedom and truth*.”

moral theology within the Church. His reflection is broader and concerns the situation of humanity today⁸. That is why the first answer to why *Veritatis Splendor* is controversial must be twofold: on the one hand, *Veritatis Splendor* fits within a controversial history, and on the other hand – and this is the most fundamental point – because it fits within the dramatic context of a moral and spiritual crisis⁹.

2. *Veritatis Splendor* has a controversial reception

If the first answer as to why *Veritatis Splendor* is controversial has to do with the historical background of the encyclical and its context, the second has to do with its reception. At this level, we point to the fact that in various ecclesial circles, it provoked reactions of strong criticism.

I will not go into the individual contested points, preferring to remain at a general level. There was a great variety of commentary after the publication of *Veritatis Splendor*. While many had the rather generic title – such as *Understanding Veritatis Splendor* (Wilkins 1994) – others were more provocative intimating a certain critique. Of these latter, I recall two, staying only with their title since I cannot analyze the individual contributions, which were sometimes very stimulating.

The first publication plays with the title of the encyclical (*Veritatis Splendor* – “The splendor of truth”) and is entitled *The Splendor of Accuracy* (Selling – Jans 1994)¹⁰. Here the issue of accuracy is raised, questioning whether *Veritatis Splendor* succeeds in being accurate. That is, whether its diagnosis and prognosis is capable of giving rigorous answers to real problems. It advances the hypothesis that the encyclical “rejects or criticizes positions that in reality are not held by any serious Roman Catholic moral theologian” (Selling

⁸ Cf. Ratzinger 1995, 12: „L’interrogativo che ha guidato il Papa nell’elaborazione dell’Enciclica *Veritatis Splendor*, riguarda quindi certamente la discussione teologico-morale all’interno della chiesa stessa, ma va molto al di là. È espressione della preoccupazione per l’uomo. Deriva dalla responsabilità per i grandi problemi dell’umanità di oggi.”

⁹ According to Vidal 1994 one can interpret *Veritatis Splendor* in light of *Centesimus annus*: after the collapse of real socialism there was a need for a new ethical leadership, since the West suffers from a moral vacuum and risks proposing a democracy without values (cf. CA, 46). In this we are confirmed in seeing *Veritatis Splendor* as a response to a crisis. However, even then, the author gives an overall negative judgment on the encyclical: “la mia impressione generale è che si tratti di una proposta di «restaurazione morale» all’interno della Chiesa, una proposta pensata anche per l’umanità di oggi” (Vidal 1994, 37).

¹⁰ Here the main and longest contribution is that of Selling 1994. In it, among other things, an attempt is made to identify the authors or theological schools against which the statements of *Veritatis Splendor*.

1994, 35)¹¹. This is because, as is often the case in a polemical argument, the encyclical exaggerates the tone, either by presenting a caricature of the positions to be condemned or by making vague statements that cannot in fact be traced to any theological position¹².

The second text comes from the German world and has as its title a question: *Moraltheologie im Abseits?* (“Moral theology offside?”) (Mieth 1994). In the foreword, Dietmar Mieth argues that contrary to the hopes of some neo-integralists, the plan to put moral theology offside as was earlier attempted in the biblical sciences – even then unsuccessfully – has not been realized. Moral theology is in fact equipped to give a response to the encyclical: at least according to the subtitle of the text (*Antwort auf die Enzyklika Veritatis Splendor*: “Response to the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*”). The “offside” metaphor is very interesting. Everyone who follows soccer knows very well what it means to be offside. A soccer player can make a beautiful play, score a stupendous goal, but if he is offside his efforts are perfectly useless. In fact, they cause disappointment and discouragement. It could be said, then, that according to this line of interpretation *Veritatis Splendor* – like an inflexible referee – tries to put moral theology offside, no matter how many beautiful plays it accomplishes¹³. Developing this metaphor, one could also say that in doing so, it is the Magisterium itself that places itself offside with respect to the ethical problems of humanity. In this sense, one of the main critical remarks about *Veritatis Splendor* is that it speaks a language that is too abstract, hardly understandable today, and presents a philosophical and theological frame of reference that is no longer adequate to engage in dialogue with the modern liberal and democratic societies.

Another aspect I would like to mention, in the context of the reception of *Veritatis Splendor*, is the relationship with the subsequent Magisterium. I think that after the many initial commentaries, a certain silence descended upon *Veritatis Splendor*, until another magisterial document generated some controversy because of its relationship with John Paul II’s encyclical. Of course, I am talking about *Amoris laetitia*, which has provoked a heated and inter-

¹¹ See also McCormick 1994, 20: “The vast majority of moral theologians known as proportion-
alists will *rightly* say that they do not hold or teach what the encyclical attributes to them.”

¹² Vidal 1994, 28 speaks in the same vein.

¹³ Regarding the way the Magisterium looks at moral theology, Häring 1994 speaks of “a distrust that wounds”, stating that the encyclical, while containing good things, nevertheless serves one purpose, namely to promote obedience to the Pope, especially when it speaks of contraception: “*Veritatis Splendor* contains many beautiful things. But almost all real splendour is lost when it becomes evident that the whole document is directed above all towards one goal: to endorse total assent and submission to all utterances of the Pope, and above all on one crucial point: that the use of any artificial means for regulating birth is intrinsically evil and sinful, without exception” (Häring 1994, 9).

esting hermeneutical conflict between two documents of the papal Magisterium. Again, I cannot, and will not, go into detail here. I merely point out that, to use the interpretive categories employed by Benedict XVI with reference to the Second Vatican Council, there is a contrast here of two hermeneutics: that of “reform” and that of “discontinuity” (Benedict XVI 2005). For the former, *Amoris laetitia* represents a development of *Veritatis Splendor* while at the same time giving it an interpretation¹⁴, while for the latter hermeneutic there would be at least a risk of contradiction between the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* on intrinsically evil acts and the proposals of chapter eight of *Amoris laetitia*. The controversial character of *Veritatis Splendor* in this case is internal to the Magisterium itself or, rather, to its interpretation. It probably could not be otherwise, since the Magisterium is not composed of a series of timeless and unhistorical documents, but corresponds to a living tradition that requires a correct and wise hermeneutic.

3. *Veritatis Splendor* takes on an intentionally controversial value

We come to a third possible answer to why *Veritatis Splendor* is controversial. Here the answer is no longer located outside the encyclical, but within it. In fact, in chapter two, it becomes intentionally controversial. Here it confronts, in its work of discernment, certain “tendencies” (this is the term used in the title of the chapter) in moral theology today. According to the encyclical, problems arise when some currents of thought, instead of keeping certain tensions together, separate them by setting them in opposition. The core thesis of the encyclical, as I mentioned above, is that the crisis of morality (both as *lived* and *thought* morality) stems today from the split between freedom and truth. This split takes the form of other separations, of which I will give some examples¹⁵.

¹⁴ According to Garrigues 2017, *Amoris laetitia*, while never naming the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, actually implies an interpretation and development of *Veritatis Splendor*. This implies first of all that there is no contradiction between the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris laetitia*, as the *dubia* of the cardinals presented to Francis would imply. In fact, *Amoris laetitia* stands on the subjective level of the imputability of the act to the subject and not on the objective level of defining an act as evil. Thus, *Veritatis Splendor* can no longer be considered “the alpha and omega” of moral doctrine (as some zealous interpreters wanted), since the current Magisterium places and interprets it within the whole of Catholic Tradition. Garrigues recalls Thomas’ explanation of the role of intellect and will with respect to an act: the intellect has primacy over the will, it moves the will when it defines, it knows the act as good, but the will has primacy over the intellect, it moves it as to the exercise of the act (cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 9, a.1; *De malo*, 6). In other words, one must distinguish between specification of the act (*intellect*) and its exercise (*will*). From this it follows that one must distinguish between the specific evil object of the act and its sinful exercise. It is not the same thing to consider the object of the act as *known* and as *willed*.

¹⁵ See Bonandi’s discussion from which I take my inspiration freely (Bonandi 1996, 45-94).

First, there is the tension between autonomy and the specificity of Christian morality, a tension that harks back to the famous post-conciliar opposition between the “autonomous ethic” and the “faith ethic”. In particular, *Veritatis Splendor* criticizes the separation between an “ethical order” in which human reason legislates and an “order of salvation,” that is proper to faith (cf. no. 37), between the *humanum* and the *christianum*, between the categorical content of concrete norms and the transcendental horizon of human freedom before God. In the face of this, *Veritatis Splendor* invokes the concept of “participated theonomy”: “man’s free obedience to God’s law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God’s wisdom and providence” (no. 41). A decisive concept is used here – that of participation – by which one is to understand both the identity of the human person and the role of practical reason. With the concept of participation, it is clear that the role of law draws its righteousness from God’s wisdom (natural law and eternal law) and as well that dependence on God increases human freedom, and vice versa. The more one participates in divine wisdom, the more one is dependent on God, the freer one is. This is shown both in the Thomistic concept of natural law as a mode of participation in divine wisdom specific to human beings and in the relationship in Christ, between his obedience to the Father and his sovereign freedom.

Second, the critique of *Veritatis Splendor* also touches on the form that the relationship between freedom and nature and between reason and nature has taken both in modernity and in some moral-theological tendencies. Nature in modernity is thought as being fundamentally opposed to spirit: it is a limit that humankind must continually overcome in order to assert his power and freedom. There is thus a strongly reductive concept of nature, which reduces it to a mere empirical datum. This applies not only to the nature that we are not (the environment), but also to the nature that we are, that is, the body. In this sense, *Veritatis Splendor* claims the unity of the human person, reiterating the essential role of the body for moral considerations. Here again the body is not understood in an abstractly biological way¹⁶, but as the living body (*Leib*), subsisting in the concrete human being. Note that a reductive concept of nature corresponds to a reductive concept of reason, regarded simply as an argumentative logic or calculative faculty, and a reductive concept of freedom, understood as indefinite power, constantly turned to the future¹⁷. The tension between nature and reason or between nature and freedom should be thought

¹⁶ Biological nature is not normative as biological – that is, studied empirically (which is always the result of an abstraction) – but always as a nature of a person.

¹⁷ Freedom is not simply negative (freedom from conditioning), it is not *perfectibilité* without form as Rousseau claims but is freedom-toward (*telos!*). The question of the good is essential if freedom is not to be reduced to self-determination. In that case a separation between inner and outer is always proposed: the former is the intention, the will; the latter is the act, that which is material.

of, according to *Veritatis Splendor*, within the “nature of the human person,” understanding the person in the unity of soul and body (no. 50)¹⁸. In short, the unity of the human person is more original than its distinction¹⁹. Instead, in many moral-theological conceptions, according to *Veritatis Splendor*, there remains the basic idea of modern anthropology, which splits the person into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, conceiving the former in a transcendental way and the latter in an empirical sense²⁰.

Third, it is worth mentioning the tension between conscience and norm. Modern moral theology has largely lived in this tension: moral systems can be interpreted as defending the primacy of law over conscience or conscience over law, though precisely in mutual opposition. If the law exists and is clear, it obliges the conscience to apply it in the situations experienced by the person; conversely, if the law does not exist or is unclear, conscience has the power to determine itself in full freedom. Here again, what comes to the foreground is the modern subject-object problem: the conscience as an expression of subjectivity, and the norm of objectivity. *Veritatis Splendor* warns that the original unity of the person, in which conscience and norm are in constitutive reciprocity, is at stake here. Conscience is never solitary or empty; it is always in reference to the good that calls it and commands it. The norm is never simply external, since it expresses the orientation of conscience toward authentic free-

One identifies the former with what is good, without need of rectification, unquestionable, while only the latter should be rectified.

¹⁸ The language in *Veritatis Splendor* does not always appear rigorous in this regard, for example when it says, quoting *Donum vitae*, that the human being is called “to make use of his own body” (no. 50).

¹⁹ *Veritatis Splendor* speaks in this regard of “a division within man himself” (no. 48), of “the separation which some have posited between the freedom of individuals and the nature which all have in common” (no. 51).

²⁰ According to Robert Spaemann, modern science is based on an anthropological dualism that can be seen summarized in the distinction between *physiological* and *pragmatic* perspectives in the knowledge of human beings, such as was proposed by Kant: “Physiological knowledge of man aims at the investigation of what Nature makes of man, whereas pragmatic knowledge of man aims at what man makes, can, or should make of himself as a freely acting being” (Kant 1996, 3). This is certainly not a dualism that Kant invents: Descartes had already posited it when he thought in dualistic terms about the relationship between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. To think of these two perspectives in a unified way is in fact impossible from this radically dualistic view. And, in fact, since Descartes there has been a divarication that has led either to a purely scientific view, exemplified for example in the idea of molecular biologist Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, that we are mere survival machines or robots blindly programmed to preserve our genes, or to a hermeneutic interpretation that tends to think of man as pure freedom, absolute freedom devoid of essence, as for example in Sartre’s philosophy. The extremes, in short, touch each other: anthropology that conceives of itself as purely subjective and rejects all objectification may well tolerate a scientific view of man, while the scientist may peacefully accept an interpretation of self that makes no scientific claim. In other words, we are dealing with the irreconcilable alternative (but one that has a common origin) between *spiritualism* and *naturalism* (Spaemann 1987).

dom. The relationship between conscience and norm is thus comprehensible only in the polarity between freedom and truth or good. There are no separate spheres in mutual contrast (more space to the norm and less to conscience or more to conscience and less to the norm), because conscience does not exist except in the destination to truth and openness to the good²¹. Otherwise, one totally denies the dignity of conscience or reduces it to something else, that is, to a psychological phenomenon, which can be studied empirically.

Of course, other examples could be adduced, such as the tension between the fundamental option and the concrete kinds of behavior. However, it seems to me important to emphasize the central point denounced by *Veritatis Splendor* in its second chapter, which is explicitly controversial: some current moral-theological tendencies turn the tensions mentioned earlier (between autonomy and heteronomy, between nature and reason, between conscience and law, between freedom and truth, etc...) into separations or even contrasts. In doing so, they forget the great lesson of Romano Guardini who, in another context, spoke of the doctrine of opposites (*Gegensatzlehre*). That which is opposite (*Gegensatz*), for Guardini, must first be distinguished from that which is contradictory (such as, for example, good and evil, being and non-being, which are mutually exclusive) and, then, it must be regarded in a relationship of mutual referral. In the concrete living, relations are given within the unity of living itself. It is a unity in tension. It embraces elements that refer to each other. We could speak in this regard of polarities²². When polarities become oppositions, one loses the sense of an original and vital unity and gets lost in abstract and inflexible concepts²³. The inability to think about (and live out) these polarities in a unified manner can be seen as the basis of today's moral crisis.

²¹ Some moral-theological tendencies, rightly wishing to get out of the shallows of a conception of conscience as a mere application of the law to the concrete case, have sometimes reduced it to an instance of defense of a solipsistically conceived subjectivity. Correlative to this is a procedural idea of reason, reduced to an argumentative capacity. Note that a consciousness that wants to be autonomous and "creative" can feel norms as extrinsic in the same way as those issued by an external authority, precisely because the decisive point is the consonance between reason and norm. The norm is understood in a legalistic sense and is not instead seen as consonant with reason and ultimately with human proper good.

²² Guardini summarizes the meaning of his theory in a 1964 writing entitled *Sinn der Gegensatzlehre*. For the major work, cf. Guardini 1925.

²³ According to Bonandi 1996, 185 the theories presented by *Veritatis Splendor* tend "a pensare piuttosto in concetti e termini chiusi, nel senso di sconnessi dalla totalità, incapaci di fecondarsi a vicenda (in quanto astrattamente concepiti) e perciò irrigiditi (molte tesi sulla morale autonoma e sulla opzione fondamentale sono di questo tipo). Ne deriva il rischio, che crediamo inevitabile, di sminuire non solo il senso dell'unità, ma anche quello della differenza."

4. *Veritatis Splendor* traces a way to guide us in today's moral crisis

We come thus to a few words of conclusion. No doubt, *Veritatis Splendor* was moved by a defensive concern, as becomes clear by the centrality of the second chapter whose language is at times quite polemical. Due to this, there has emerged a temptation to react to the encyclical and its arguments rather than grasping its *intentio profundior*²⁴. It seems to me that *Veritatis Splendor* should be interpreted more broadly than by just discerning some tendencies of present-day moral theology. It is for this reason a pity that chapter two was drafted in such a technical way (though perhaps it was necessary) and that its reading is therefore reserved for moral theologians. If one reads the encyclical as a critique of modernity or of some of its deviations²⁵ (such as the opposition between conscience and law, between person and nature, between autonomy and heteronomy), John Paul II's encyclical may display an unsuspected relevance. Similarly, for example, *Laudato si'*, which many have received enthusiastically, goes in the same direction. Its critique of the technocratic paradigm focuses in its own way on the modern split between nature and freedom. Its call for an adequate anthropology intends to overcome the idea of the human beings as arbitrary creators of meaning, in order to lead them back to a being given to themselves.

That is why it is essential to read chapter 2 of *Veritatis Splendor* as a warning, a danger signal. However, this is not enough. Therefore, it should not be read by itself, but only together with chapters 1 and 3²⁶. They present not an extrinsic framework, a purely ornamental addition, but the context within which the reflections contained in chapter two must be understood. This is because the crisis – which is more than a crisis of individual behaviors or single aspects – can only be answered comprehensively. The crisis is not overcome by extrinsic adjustments, by tightening one norm or loosening another. It implies a different vision of human beings and the meaning of their agency in the world.

²⁴ It should be noted, however, that the contestations received by *Veritatis Splendor* also contribute to the growth in the understanding of the truth. If it is true that “the development of the Church's moral doctrine is similar to that of the doctrine of the faith” (no. 53 footnote 100), it can certainly be said, as the history of theological thought of the early centuries teaches, that moral truth also grows through contestations and disputes.

²⁵ Fuchs 1994, 45-64 states that *Veritatis Splendor* starts from a rejection of modernity, which instead should be accepted as fact. Yet it, more in intention than in expression, poses three decisive questions to modernity: the link between truth and freedom; the universality of certain norms; and the constitutive relationship of ethics to otherness. And he tries to respond with a theological approach different from that of the encyclical.

²⁶ Each chapter has its own purpose. According to Bonandi 1996, 22 the first chapter highlights the gains of recent moral theology, the second the risks, and the third the tasks.

Therefore, I would like to conclude by recalling the message of the first chapter (the third chapter is also very important, but I do not have time to analyze it). Chapter 1 is not a kind of homily, nor is it properly a biblical meditation. Rather, it is the reception of the conciliar indication of *Optatam totius*, which frees Christian morality from a narrow, sterile legalism in order to place it in the groove of the divine call in Christ. With his call to the “question about morality,” John Paul II placed the question of norms within the horizon of the “question about the full meaning of life” (no. 7), and of the comprehensive perspective of the good. In this sense, the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* shows that the moral question (the good) is inseparable, on the one hand, from the religious question (God) and, on the other hand, from the soteriological and eschatological question (eternal life), which is realized in following Christ, in the *sequela Christi* (cf. Tremblay 1996; Scola 2006). To account for this nexus between desire²⁷ and *sequela*²⁸ is, in my view, one of the most fascinating tasks for moral theology. In this nexus we find the relationship between anthropology and Christology, between creation and redemption, between vocation and perfection, between grace and commandment, between law and gospel, between holiness and goodness, between love of God and love of neighbor (cf. no. 14), between unity of love and plurality of commandments, between love and obedience, between dogmatic theology and moral theology (cf. no. 111)... and the list could go on and on. Here, too, one can identify polarities, *Gegensätze*, which are not to be separated or contrasted, but grasped in their vital unity.

Chapter 3 takes up some of these connections, primarily the relationship between truth and freedom. This time it is grasped not in a philosophical or

²⁷ Human desire must be grasped in all its density: it is through desire that we are moved to goodness, it is through desire that we enter into the dynamism of the encounter with God and the tension toward beatitude. This desire is fulfilled only in Christ, “the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart” (VS 7). The theme of desire appears rarely discussed in theological-moral research. Instead, the question of happiness is decisive, from Augustine to Thomas. Consider only Augustine’s Confessions in which he questions how it is possible for everyone to desire the beatitude: “Is not happiness precisely what all seek, so that there is not one who does not desire it? But where did they know it, that they should desire it so? Where have they seen it, that they should love it? Obviously we have it in some way, but I do not know how. [...] ...my concern is whether happiness is in the memory. For I repeat we should not love it unless we had some knowledge of it. [...] Thus happiness is known to all, for if they could be asked with one voice whether they wish for happiness, there is no doubt whatever that they would all answer yes. And this could not be unless the thing itself, signified by the word, lay somehow in their memory” (*Confessions* X, 20,29: Augustine 2006, 205-206). For Aquinas, the whole moral part of the *Summa* is oriented by the ultimate end, by beatitude. In *Veritatis Splendor* the theme of man’s ultimate end does not appear much, the theme of desire appears only in the first part. This theme should also be investigated in relation to other fields, primarily philosophy and psychology.

²⁸ Cf. VS 19: “*Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.*” For the nexus between desire and following Christ, see Zamboni 2019.

theological-moral sense but in a Christological and therefore pastoral sense (cf. no. 84). The focal point is to grasp the unity of the nexus between truth and freedom not in the abstract but in the person of Christ himself and, in a special way, in the Paschal Mystery. What is said here is also valid for other nexuses that are presented in chapter three, such as that between faith and morality (nos. 88-89) or between truth and mercy, to which indeed *Veritatis Splendor* refers in several places (nos. 95; 104; 118), but without providing an in-depth reflection. In any case, the basic perspective seems to me to be traced: it is only in the singular existence of Christ as a concrete universal norm, to borrow von Balthasar's words, that the tensions I referred to earlier – and which make *Veritatis Splendor* potentially conflicting – can find their radical unity. And it is in the universal singularity of Christ that the Church's pastoral and evangelizing work regarding moral issues also finds its foundation. Significant in this regard is the mention of martyrdom. Martyrdom is not the heroic act of resistance to the world, as it has sometimes been presented and as perhaps even *Veritatis Splendor* itself sometimes tends to think. It is first and foremost grace, and as such obedience. It is attestation of the primacy of God, and as such moral act. It is participation in the paschal mystery, and as such fulfillment of the moral (Zamboni 2007).

Ratzinger's lecture that I quoted at the very beginning concluded with an invitation to understand, beyond the specialized debate, the profound intention of *Veritatis Splendor*. This is grasped, according to him, in the proposal of a broad and liberating vision of morality, at once Christological and rational, in obedience to the conciliar legacy and mandate²⁹. This is also my fervent wish.

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²⁹ Cf. Ratzinger 2004, 42-43: "Guardando al modo con cui fu recepita l'Enciclica *Veritatis Splendor*, la mia delusione non derivò tanto dal fatto che essa diede occasione a molte critiche (venendo dalla Germania è per me cosa normale che anche documenti pontifici siano oggetto di critica), ma piuttosto dal fatto che non si sia entrati in questo grande dibattito circa i principi della morale, circa questa grande e rinnovata visione nello stesso tempo cristologica e razionale, perché Cristo è il *Logos*. Non si è voluti entrare in dibattito sulla grande sfida circa la visione complessiva della morale, ma ci si è limitati a una discussione su dettagli, difendendo contro la presentazione del consequenzialismo e accusando l'Enciclica di essere semplicistica e caricaturale. Un tale dibattito su dettagli tecnici può anche avere una sua utilità, ma non è certo la risposta voluta, giusta e necessaria alla sfida che *Veritatis Splendor* propone ai moralisti e che è ultimamente un approfondimento dello stesso mandato conciliare."

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