

The Historical and Theoretical Background of *Veritatis Splendor*

Historyczne i teoretyczne tło *Veritatis splendor*

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Abstract: This paper examines the historical and theoretical background of *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II's encyclical letter specifically devoted to fundamental moral theology. With the reforms of the Council of Trent, moral theology had taken a juridical turn, being understood primarily as a discipline for confessors. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the resulting manualist tradition was increasingly seen as inadequate, unable to speak to people's lives. At the same time, the two world wars impetus the philosophical movement of existentialism. Through situation ethics, some tendencies of existentialist thought found their way into moral theology. Pius XII saw the need to respond to this development. The Second Vatican Council was regarded as an opportunity for a new presentation of moral theology that would overcome the limits of manualism and pay more attention to questions of conscience, the use of Scripture, and the emphasis on Christian discipleship. The Fathers rejected the draft originally prepared by a dedicated commission as inadequate, but they were unable to produce a new text. However, at least some issues of moral theology were discussed in other conciliar writings, notably *Gaudium et spes* and *Optatam totius*. The publication of *Humanae vitae* in 1968 proved to be a catalyst for some of the most difficult and central questions of fundamental moral theology, including the topic of intrinsically evil acts. In 1987, John Paul II finally announced that the Holy See would publish a document devoted to these issues. This text saw the light of day six years later and took the name *Veritatis Splendor*.

Keywords: conscience; existentialism; intrinsically evil acts; manualism; morality; situation ethics

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł analizuje historyczne i teoretyczne tło *Veritatis splendor*, encykliki Jana Pawła II poświęconej w szczególności fundamentom teologii moralnej. Wraz z reformami Soboru Trydenckiego, teologia moralna przybrała prawniczy obrót, będąc rozumiana przede wszystkim jako dyscyplina dla spowiedników. Pod koniec XIX i na początku XX wieku wynikająca z tego tradycja manualistyczna była coraz częściej postrzegana jako nieadekwatna i niezdolna, by przemawiać do ludzi. W tym samym czasie dwie wojny światowe dały impuls filozoficznemu ruchowi egzystencjalizmu. Poprzez etykę sytuacyjną niektóre tendencje myśli egzystencjalistycznej znalazły drogę do teologii moralnej. Pius XII dostrzegł potrzebę zareagowania na ten rozwój. Sobór Watykański II został uznany za okazję do nowej prezentacji teologii moralnej, która przewyciężyłaby ograniczenia manualizmu i poświęciła więcej uwagi kwestiom sumienia, wykorzystaniu Pisma Świętego i naciskowi na fakt bycia uczniem Chrystusa. Ojcowie odrzucili jako nieadekwatny projekt pierwotnie przygotowany przez specjalną komisję, ale nie byli w stanie opracować nowego tekstu. Jednak przynajmniej niektóre kwestie teologii moralnej zostały omówione w innych pismach soborowych, zwłaszcza w *Gaudium et spes* i *Optatam totius*. Publikacja *Humanae vitae* w 1968 roku okazała się katalizatorem dla niektórych z najtrudniejszych i centralnych kwestii fundamentalnej teologii moralnej, w tym tematu czynów wewnętrznie złych. W 1987 roku Jan Paweł II ogłosił, że Stolica Apostolska opublikuje dokument poświęcony tym zagadnieniom. Sześć lat później tekst ten ujrzał światło dzienne i przyjął nazwę *Veritatis splendor*.

Słowa kluczowe: czyny wewnętrznie złe; egzystencjalizm; etyka sytuacyjna; sumienie; manualizm; moralność

Introduction

In this paper I would like to present the historical and theoretical background of Pope John Paul II's moral encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. What is the historical context in which the document is set? What are the main steps in its genesis? What are the main ideas and tendencies to which it seeks to respond and where do these ideas and trends themselves come from? I will begin with a brief allusion to the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, and then essentially focus on events and ideas of the twentieth century.

When the Council of Trent reaffirmed the obligation, originally established by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (Denzinger and Hünermann 2012, n. 812), of all the faithful to confess their sins at least once a year before Easter and in addition specified that all mortal sins of which penitents are conscious were to be confessed one by one (Denzinger and Hünermann 2012, n. 1680), there arose a corresponding need to train confessors to administer this sacrament well. Confessors would have to know how to classify the sinful acts confessed by their penitents as mortal or venial sins; they would have to be able to judge how circumstances can mitigate or aggravate a sin, and they would also

have to take an interest in the underlying motives of their penitents in order to understand the genesis of the sin and give advice on how to avoid it in the future (Denzinger and Hünemann 2012, n. 1681). Here we have the beginnings of the manualist tradition, in which moral theology was centered on sin and aimed at serving confessors in their ministry (Pinckaers 1996, 254-279).

I. The Historical Background of Existentialism and Situation Ethics

From the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, we move quickly to the city of Copenhagen in the mid-nineteenth century. Here Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a fascinating and prolific writer, laid the groundwork for what would later be called the philosophy of existence or existentialism, emphasizing the individual over the universal and subjective choices over objective systems. Many of the most important existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century were indebted to him (cf. for instance: Granito 2015; McBride 1995; Thonhauser 2016). If Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is correct in asserting that “not ideas but events change the world” (1958, 273), then it is perhaps no coincidence that existentialism, inspired by Kierkegaard, rose to prominence in the aftermath of World War I. It became more than just a trend in academic philosophy, but a way of life that really spoke to people because of what they had experienced.

A generation that had witnessed the death and destruction of the Great War, with its senseless slaughter that left no room for heroes, would certainly be very receptive to Karl Jasper’s (1883-1969) message about limit situations (1932) and eager to hear about Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) analysis of the modes of human existence (1927). Heidegger, as the young Arendt perceived him, was the “hidden king” who “reigned in the realm of thinking,” so that now, in him, “thinking has come to life again” (1978, 295). Readers of *Being and Time* in 2023 will no doubt be surprised at how appealing Heidegger’s thought could be to a teenager in the early 1920s. The experience of this first collapse of European civilization from 1914 to 1918 may be a good part of the explanation. Europe’s leaders unthinkingly led their peoples into the abyss. Their appeals to virtues and ideals turned out to be mere slogans and trivialities. The traditional way of thinking and acting led to disaster. If there were any cultural treasures left, they had to be resurrected after dying in the trenches of the Somme. What was needed was a radically new approach, which existentialism offered. In Heidegger’s terms, *Dasein* comes to its authentic existence, the mode of being that is proper to it and to it alone, in its being-toward-death.

The experience of the First World War and the subsequent emergence of a new approach to human beings, and thus to morality, did not stop at the gates of the Catholic Church and the doors of its theological faculties. For our

purposes, two particularly important figures are Fritz Tillmann (1874-1953) of the Theological Faculty of Bonn and his student Theodor Steinbüchel (1888-1949), who taught moral theology at the University of Munich until 1939 and then, in the 1940s, at the Catholic Theological Faculty of Tübingen. One of Tillmann's major contributions can be seen in his concern to recover the importance of Scripture for moral theology, together with his emphasis on the idea of imitation or *sequela* (Tillmann 1933), for which he drew inspiration from Max Scheler (1874-1928) (Scheler 1916).

Steinbüchel asked about the philosophical foundations of Catholic moral teaching. In his 1938 discussion of the German philosopher Eberhard Grisebach (1880-1945) (Grisebach 1928), he was, most probably, the first to coin the term "situation ethics" (Steinbüchel 1938, 237-257). His main criticism of situation ethics is that it too needs a *Wesensethik*, an essential ethics, inasmuch as there are some essential laws that transcend the individual and are necessary for the very fulfillment of our humanity. His example is the law of self-giving, of "giving oneself to the Thou" (Steinbüchel 1938, 252). At the same time, he concedes much to the main concerns of situation ethics, and he seeks to appreciate what it offers in terms of true moral insight. Traditional casuistry is very limited. General principles can only take us so far. Life, in its concreteness and diversity, is always greater than our theories, so that "no casuistry, no matter how much and how wisely it is based on experience, can ever anticipate situations in their historically specific and unique concreteness" (Steinbüchel 1938, 246). And even when Steinbüchel seeks to defend the importance of what he calls "essence," he does so in rather existential terms, since he is not speaking of *human* essence, but of *my* essence, which in some sense is at stake in *my own* decision: "I, as a human being, am *a* human being, *this* human being, *myself*. What is realized in me in my moral conduct is my essence in its individual character, in my most unique life situations, and never without the decision that is proper to my self, that is possible to me, and that is imperative to me" (Steinbüchel 1938, 253). One of Steinbüchel's most important doctoral students was Bernhard Häring (1912-1998) (Keenan 2010, 91) who later became one of the most influential moral theologians of the twentieth century, not least because of his influence on the Second Vatican Council (Curran 2018; Hill 2006; Kennedy 2013).

The years of World War II, from 1939 to 1945, witnessed even more violence and destruction than the Great War. The carnage at the front, especially in the East, was beyond imagination. The war included the obliteration of entire cities and the direct targeting of civilians. While the fighting was going on at the front, the Nazis, against all military reason, unleashed what they called the "Final Solution" on the populations they either ruled or had already brought under their control, systematically murdering up to six million Jews

in extermination camps, along with others whose lives they did not consider worth living. While the crimes committed during military operations on both sides challenged moral convictions, the Shoah went beyond anything imaginable, signaling the collapse not only of civilization but of humanity on the part of the German leadership and much of the German population.

Bernhard Häring served in the German military during the war, registered as a medical orderly, but serving in secret as a chaplain to friend and foe alike (Kennedy 2013, 423-424). He was present at the Battle of Stalingrad, fought from 1942 to 1943, which is considered the bloodiest battle in human history. When Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus declared the surrender of what was left of his 6th Army, Häring led a group of some 300 soldiers out of the city, avoiding capture by the Russians. He urged that the soldiers throw away their guns. The escape was successful. The group avoided capture and almost certain death (Häring 1976, 86-87).

After the war, Häring blamed the absolute moral collapse of Germany during the Hitler regime mostly on his fellow citizens' blind trust in authority. But "the dark years of the Third Reich" also made him wonder "about the kind of obedience we were taught toward the Church: whether it truly served maturity, growth in liberty, and commitment to liberation in the Church and the world" (Häring 1976, 73).

Understandably, he was not alone in being skeptical of what had been understood as obedience to authority and fidelity to tradition. The ideas proposed by the various forms of existentialism took on a whole new plausibility. If it was the blind following of leaders that led to disaster, would it not be much healthier to make up one's own mind? The self-thinking individual, who chooses himself in his own subjectivity, seems to be the bulwark against collectivism and totalitarianism. I decide for myself who and what I am. No *Führer* or *Duce* will tell me that I am part of a greater whole whose nature, essence, and destiny are found here or there. What matters is existence, not essence, my decision, not my belonging to a people; there is only my own authentic mode of being and no shared destiny.

2. Pius XII's Response to Situation Ethics

As comprehensible as these currents were, at times they tended to go to the extreme, and in 1952 Pius XII felt the need to respond to them. On March 23, he delivered a radio message dedicated to the question of conscience and its formation among young people. Here he introduced the term "new morality," which he defined as an approach that leaves "all ethical criteria to the individual conscience," and for which conscience thus becomes "the absolute arbiter

of its determinations” (Pius XII 1952a, 273). According to Pius XII, the accusation of the “new morality” against the Church is that “instead of promoting the law of human freedom and love, ... [it] relies, almost exclusively and with excessive rigidity on the firmness and intransigence of Christian moral laws, often resorting to terms such as ‘you are obliged,’ or ‘it is not permissible,’ which have too much of the taste of debasing pedantry” (Pius XII 1952a, 274). The Pope responds to this objection by pointing out that Christ himself taught the observance of the commandments. Significantly for our context, he also refers, among other scriptural passages, to the pericope of Christ’s encounter with the rich young man, to whose question Christ replied that in order to enter life he must keep the commandments.

Barely a month later, on April 18 of the same year, Pius XII delivered a discourse in which he took up the idea of the “new morality” again and now expanded it, wishing “to reveal the deeper sources of this conception,” which, according to him, “could be characterized as ‘ethical existentialism,’ ‘ethical actualism,’ ‘ethical individualism,’” all of which could be expressed by “what has been called elsewhere ‘*Situationsethik*’ – situation ethics” (Pius XII 1952b, 414). This is how he sums up what he sees as the essence of situation ethics:

The distinctive feature of this morality is that it is not based on universal moral laws, such as the Ten Commandments, but on the real, concrete conditions or circumstances in which we must act, and according to which the individual conscience has to judge and choose. This state of affairs is unique, and it applies only once to any human action. This is why the proponents of this ethic assert that the decision of conscience cannot be dictated by universal ideas, principles and laws (Pius XII 1952b, 414).

In this view, every situation is unique. Each case happens only once. Each person stands before God as an individual. What counts is one’s filial love for God the Father. “Seen in this way,” Pius continues, “the decision of conscience is therefore a personal ‘risk,’ according to one’s own knowledge and evaluation, in all sincerity before God. The two things that God considers are the right intention and the sincere response; the action does not matter to him” (Pius XII 1952b, 416).

Against the challenge of the new morality, Pius XII then reaffirms the permanent validity of the moral law, emphasizing that its obligations “are based on the essence, the nature of man and his essential relationships” and thus have force “wherever man is found” (Pius XII 1952b, 417). Pius does not speak here of biological human nature, nor does he derive moral obligations directly from natural inclinations. It is very remarkable, and often overlooked, that he speaks of “the nature of man” and “his *essential relationships*.” In fact, as he proceeds

to give a long list of acts for which, according to him, no examination of any situation is necessary because what we have to do is clear from the outset, the basis of the obligation to obey lies in what he calls “the essential relationships between man and God, between man and man, between spouses, between parents and children” (Pius XII 1952b, 417). From these essential relationships, including also “the essential relationships of community in the family, in the Church, in the State,” a whole catalog of actions follows that are “gravely forbidden by the divine Lawmaker.” Without claiming to be exhaustive Pius XII lists among them: “hatred of God, blasphemy, ... perjury, homicide, bearing false witness, ... adultery and fornication, ... stealing and robbery, ... the denial of just wages, ... fraudulent bankruptcy” (Pius XII 1952b, 417).

Implicit here is an understanding of natural and divine law as establishing and maintaining a harmonious order in our relationships. Obedience to the law is not a matter of blind deference to nature or authority, but a matter of cultivating and preserving our relationships with others: with God and with our fellow human beings. The idea is that, because of the way we are made, because of our nature, we can be sure that certain kinds of actions will always harm or even break these relationships.

Pius XII then goes on to present another profound argument against situation ethics, which anticipates a consideration that will later also appear in *Veritatis Splendor* (John Paul II 1993). It concerns the question of martyrdom. According to Pius, situation ethics makes martyrdom futile. The mother of the Maccabees and her sons, Maria Goretti, and all the other martyrs certainly did not examine and analyze their “situation” before giving up their lives. Had they done so, their bloody death might have seemed useless or misguided, but it certainly was not. Therefore, “they are, in their blood, the most compelling witnesses to the truth against the ‘new morality’” (Pius XII 1952b, 418).

Finally, on February 2, 1956, Pius XII had the Holy Office publish an “Instruction on Situation Ethics” that was much shorter and contained much less argumentation than his own previous discourses. The Instruction offers a summary of what the Holy Office considers to be the main features of situation ethics, i.e., the assertion that “men are preserved and easily liberated from many otherwise insoluble ethical conflicts when each one judges in his own conscience, not primarily according to objective laws, but by means of that internal, individual light based on personal intuition, what he must do in a concrete situation” (Denzinger and Hünemann 2012, n. 3920). The Instruction then goes on to prohibit the teaching of situation ethics in universities or other institutions, and the propagation of it in books or in any other form.

Now the two Discourses of Pius XII and the Instruction of the Holy Office are peculiar among Church documents in that they do not deal with a specific moral or doctrinal issue, but rather touch the foundations of moral theology as

such. Together, as published documents, they are as close to a forerunner of *Veritatis Splendor* as there will be.

3. The Second Vatican Council

3.1. *De ordine morali christiano*

The next major event that provides an important background for *Veritatis Splendor* is the Second Vatican Council, from 1962 to 1965. After the interventions of Pius XII and the Holy Office in 1952 and 1956, situation ethics did not disappear. The Council could have been the occasion to promulgate an authoritative text that did systematically what Pius XII had begun to do more sporadically in two of his allocutions: discuss and present the foundations of Christian morality. A preparatory commission produced a draft of a dogmatic constitution on the Christian moral order (*De ordine morali christiano*) (*Acta* 1971, 695-717). It affirmed the absoluteness of the moral order, grounding it in God the Creator and Redeemer. It presented the relationship between the natural law and the revealed law of the Gospel and rejected as erroneous the proposition that “the moral law is subject to change and evolution, even in fundamental matters” (*Acta* 1971, 698). The document then devotes an entire chapter to the Christian conscience, drawing heavily on Pius XII’s 1952 Discourses on the New Morality (*Acta* 1971, 702-705). The need for the formation of conscience is affirmed, and the autonomy of the human person in this regard is denied. The human person, in the forum of his conscience, “does not become the source and norm of morality,” not even in the case of errors committed in good faith (*Acta* 1971, 703). Even where ignorance excuses from guilt, the errors committed on account of it still cause harm, which is why the formation of conscience cannot be a matter of indifference for anyone. The draft document rejects ethical subjectivism and relativism. There are matters that are clearly forbidden by the divine lawgiver, and these can never be a matter of deliberation. Here the text refers to the experience of the martyrs, as did Pius XII and as will *Veritatis Splendor*. It also quotes Our Lord’s words to the rich young man: “If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17) (*Acta* 1971, 708), which is again a recurring theme. A chapter is then devoted to sin. The authors understand sin as a violation or destruction of our friendship with God, echoing Pius XII’s emphasis on essential relationships.

The document recommends frequent confession and emphasizes the duty of penance. In its final section, it speaks of the dignity of the human person, which it locates in our vocation to share “in the divine Sonship of Christ, by which we are called and are children of God” (*Acta* 1971, 713). The Church

has always been a defender of the freedom of the will, emphasizing the concomitant human responsibility for our actions. In the age of technology, she condemns the view that “the great growth of human culture, achieved through the exact sciences and technical arts, is the same as the propagation of the Kingdom of God on earth” (*Acta* 1971, 715). We must expect our salvation not from human beings, but from God and from Christ.

The Council Fathers rejected the draft, and no alternative proposal for a document on the foundations of Christian morality was prepared. The reason for the rejection, however, was not that the document was considered superfluous, but that it was considered inadequate for various reasons. The need for such a document remained. We can interpret *Veritatis Splendor* as the somewhat belated successor of *De ordine morali christiano*, corresponding to the need to which the latter was originally intended to respond: overcome the shortcomings of manualism and take seriously the legitimate concerns of more personalistic approaches, while at the same time avoiding the extremes of the new morality and finding adequate answers to it.

3.2. *Gaudium et spes* and *Optatam totius*

Although the Second Vatican Council did not promulgate a constitution or decree specifically devoted to the moral order, it did touch on questions of Christian morality and moral theology. The question of conscience, dealt with in chapter 2 of *De ordine morali christiano*, was addressed, albeit in somewhat different terms, in *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16. And an extremely important paragraph on the nature of moral theology was introduced in the Decree on Priestly Formation *Optatam totius*, n. 16.

It has been convincingly argued that Fr. Bernhard Häring had a decisive influence on the formulation of these two texts (Kennedy 2013, 436). In the reception of the Council, these have become classic passages that certainly contributed greatly to the desired renewal of moral theology. Significantly, one of the key-affirmations on Christian conscience references Pius XII’s radio message of March 23, 1952, dedicated to the formation of conscience – a text to which we have referred above. Pius XII said, “conscience is like the most intimate and secret core of man. There he takes refuge with his spiritual faculties in absolute solitude: alone with himself, or rather, alone with God – of whose voice conscience resonates – and with himself. ... Conscience is, therefore ... a sanctuary, at whose threshold all must stop” (Pius XII 1952a, 271). The formulation adopted by *Gaudium et spes* is very similar indeed: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (Second Vatican Council 1965b, n. 16). In his dis-

course cited by the Council, Pius XII makes it sufficiently clear that the notion of conscience as the person's most intimate core does not amount to an idea of conscience as *creative* of the moral law. Rather, for him conscience is "a faithful echo, a clear reflection of the divine rule for human actions," i.e., a rule "taken from the word and from the will of Christ" (Pius XII 1952a, 272). The Council, too, takes great care to clarify the matter, explaining that "in the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience" (Second Vatican Council 1965b, n. 16).

For its part, *Optatam totius* n. 16 signals a definitive, most welcome, and necessary progress over the manualist tradition: "Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world" (Second Vatican Council 1965a, n. 16). The goal of moral theology is no longer simply to educate confessors. It is to speak to all the baptized and to elucidate their vocation in Christ. At the same time, it should draw increasingly on Sacred Scripture. It is perhaps no coincidence that these were the two main concerns of Fritz Tillmann, the teacher and colleague of Steinbüchel, the teacher of Häring, who is most likely the author of these sentences (Kennedy 2013, 436). Moral theology should be based more on Sacred Scripture, and the central notion of Christian morality is that of responding to a vocation, the calling, that is, of following Christ.

These are ideas that we will find again in *Veritatis Splendor*. Its entire first chapter is essentially a meditation on the Gospel passage about Jesus' encounter with the rich young man, in keeping with the Council's desire that moral theology "be nourished more on the teaching of the Bible." In the document's conclusion, Pope John Paul II then formulates a sentence that could have been formulated by Tillmann himself, and that is obviously entirely in keeping with the Council's intentions: "Christian morality consists, in the simplicity of the Gospel, in following Jesus Christ" (John Paul II 1993, n. 119).

As far as specific moral issues are concerned, there was a discussion in the Council hall about whether in the light of new inventions, such as the hormonal pill, new global circumstance, such as the perceived threat of overpopulation, and new theological insights, such as a more personalistic understanding of marriage, the received teaching on the immorality of contraception as formulated by Pius XI in *Casti connubii* (1930) and by Pius XII in his *Allocution to midwives* (1951) should be revisited altogether (Keenan 2010, 97-98). Häring, who was highly respected by Pope Paul VI but viewed with suspicion by Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani and the Holy Office, spoke in favor (Hill 2006, 90). As the discussion became more and more heated, Paul VI decided to withdraw the matter from the competence of the Council, to return it to the papal

commission originally established by John XXIII, and to decide on it himself in due time (Hill 2006, 91-92).

4. The Publication of *Humanae vitae*

This he did in 1968 with the publication of *Humanae vitae*. To understand the somewhat frosty reception of the document, it is important to remember that when the Council Fathers addressed the issue of responsible procreation in *Gaudium et spes*, they could only agree on a rather formal statement: “Sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law” (Second Vatican Council 1965b, n. 51). In the opinion of many, particularly the document’s note 14 to the sentence just quoted left the door open to the possible approval of at least the use of the hormonal pill, as it insinuated that the magisterium was in a state of uncertainty about the issue (Second Vatican Council 1965b, n. 51n14). All this led to growing expectations, as did the leaking of the so-called majority report of the papal commission.

Paul VI, in contrast, reaffirmed the teaching of his predecessors; he clarified the doubts raised by the invention of the hormonal pill; he attempted to support the teaching with arguments and explicitly declared licit the recourse of a couple to the infertile period of the woman. He also raised an issue of fundamental morality by calling the act of contraception “*intrinsece inhonestum*,” an act that must never be done, whatever the situation (or context or circumstances) and whatever the motivation (Paul VI 1968, n. 14). This theme will later become one of the main topics of *Veritatis Splendor*. Is there anything one should never do? Are there acts that are “intrinsically evil” – and if so, how is this intrinsic evil to be understood?

After the publication of *Humanae vitae*, several bishops’ conferences offered what they considered to be a pastoral interpretation of the document, ultimately recommending that the matter be left to the conscience of each individual (for instance: German Bishops’ Conference 1968). Many Catholic moral theologians publicly disagreed with Paul VI’s teaching, with Bernhard Häring at the forefront. The encyclical was published on July 25, 1968. On October 8 of that year, just two and a half months later, Häring received the *imprimi potest* from his superior for his work *Krise um “Humanae vitae”* [The Crisis over *Humanae Vitae*], in which he argues that married couples can decide in conscience whether or not to follow the teaching of the document (Häring 1968). The main point he makes in so many words concerns the “enormous difficulty of reconciling the way of thinking and speaking of the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 47-52: Marriage and Family)

with the argumentation of *Humanae vitae*” (Häring 1968, 59). Given the high esteem in which Häring was held by moral theologians, many followed suit. In particular, his student Charles Curran would become one of the most outspoken critics of *Humanae vitae* and one of the most vocal advocates of dissent from its teaching (Curran et al. 1969).

Paul VI was surprised, perhaps shocked, and probably hurt by the hostile reaction to his document in many parts of the world. He would not write another encyclical for the remaining ten years of his pontificate. He took up the argument dealt with in *Humanae vitae* only on rare but significant occasions, such as in a homily on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of his coronation on June 29, 1978, a little less than a month before the tenth anniversary of the encyclical and about a month and a half before his death.

When Karol Wojtyła became Pope in 1978, he soon made the promotion of the teaching of *Humanae vitae* a central concern of his pontificate, as can be seen, for example, in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (1981) and in his catecheses on human love in the divine plan (1979-1984). With the new Pope’s initiatives, the discussions and arguments among moral theologians became more pronounced.

It soon became clear that this was not just about one particular issue in the field of sexual morality. The way in which theologians argued their contrasting positions revealed a divergence also on the most fundamental issues, from more formal questions, such as the authority of the papal magisterium to intervene in moral matters and the related question of the limits of legitimate dissent, to matters more properly concerned with actual moral content: Are there intrinsically evil acts? Is there such a thing as a moral object of an act, and what would that mean? What is the role of conscience and how is it formed? How does the mature, autonomous moral subject come to judge that something is good or evil? How do we make moral judgments at all? How important are considerations of proportionality? Does the moral significance of an act lie solely at the level of motivation? Can the act be meaningfully distinguished from the motivation for the act? What is the meaning of freedom and the meaning of truth, and how are the two related? The debate over *Humanae vitae* proved to be a catalyst for some of the most difficult and central questions of fundamental moral theology.

5. John Paul II’s Announcement of a Document Dedicated to Fundamental Morals

On August 1, 1987, John Paul II issued his Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini* on the occasion of the bicentennial of the death of St. Alphonsus de’ Liguori,

patron saint of moral theologians and founder of the Redemptorist Order (John Paul II 1987a). The letter was addressed to Fr. Juan M. Lasso de la Vega y Miranda, then Superior General of the Redemptorists. After appreciating the life, mission and message of St. Alphonsus, John Paul II, toward the end of the document, comes to speak of the importance of studying and teaching moral theology. First, he makes his own the words of *Optatam totius* n. 16, which point the way to the renewal of the discipline. Then, significantly, he quotes from an address he himself had given the previous year at an International Congress on Moral Theology held in Rome and organized by the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family and the Roman Academic Center of the Holy Cross, entitled “Persona, verità e morale” [“Person, Truth and Morality”]. Here he emphasizes that truth, goodness and freedom are intimately related, and that it is important for the person, whose good “lies in being in the Truth and in doing the Truth,” to recover this connection, which has been “largely lost in contemporary culture” (John Paul II 1987b, 11-12). For this reason, according to John Paul II, “the bicentenary of Alphonsus comes as a suitable occasion to dedicate ourselves anew to this task of study,” that is, to the study of moral theology, to which Alphonsus himself contributed so much with his “great human balance and high sense of faith” (John Paul II 1987a, 1373-1374). In the next sentence, he announces what would become, some six years later, the document we know today as *Veritatis Splendor*: “This Apostolic See, for its part, will not fail to make its contribution to this effort by treating more fully and deeply the questions of the foundations of moral theology in a document which will soon be published” (John Paul II 1987a, 1374).

The process of drafting *Veritatis Splendor* cannot have been easy. It is likely that the document had been in the works for some time before its public announcement, at least, one can surmise, since the time of the Roman Congress in 1986, the theme of which, according to John Paul II, would present one of the core arguments of the text: the question of the authentic good of the person and the relationship between truth and freedom. But even counting from the time of its public announcement, six years is a long time, even by Roman standards.

6. The Reception of *Veritatis Splendor*

When the encyclical came out, its reception among moral theologians was in many ways analogous to that of *Humanae vitae*. Bernhard Häring, in any case, was again one of the first to respond. In October 1993 he published a short article in *The Tablet* entitled “A Distrust that Wounds” (Häring 1993). The title suggests that he took the Pope’s document somewhat personally. In the body

of the piece, Häring reduces the document to one point: “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, even in circumstances where contraception would be the lesser evil” (Häring 1993, 1378).

Looking at the historical background of *Veritatis Splendor*, one can judge that the question of the conditions of responsible parenthood was certainly on the Pope’s mind. However, as we have argued, there are more issues at stake. And the very fact that John Paul II presented a sustained and thoughtful discourse suggests that he wanted to do more than simply issue an act of papal authority. Undoubtedly, he wanted both to teach authoritatively and to convince argumentatively. The precise content of this teaching, the degree of its authority, and the quality of its arguments are beyond the scope of this paper, which is concerned with the encyclical’s historical and theoretical background.

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