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The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)

by

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The Pope's new encyclical, sent to the Catholic Bishops of the world, is a resume of Catholic moral teaching. For a Catholic, it is insufficient to believe in God — that is only the first, absolutely vital step by the grace of God; as a consequence, he/she must also act out that belief in his/her private and public life. That is what we mean when we say that the Catholic Church holds that her teaching extends to both faith (belief) and morals (the carrying out of that faith in concrete personal action). Both are necessary to be a Catholic.

Clearly, the authority of the Church extends to moral questions in so far as those moral actions reflect on the integrity of the faith. But the encyclical is careful to delineate its authority. It does not claim infallibility when speaking of the latter since morals entail notions of reason, natural law, experience and deduction-induction from articles of faith. Only the sacred deposit of faith (Scripture-Tradition) as revealed only by God is the object of this charism. Thus, while matters of morals are within the purview of the Church's teaching authority (it is authentic and authoritative), it does not and cannot enjoy the same degree of certitude as specifically revealed supernatural truths which only God can communicate and reveal to the human race.

Thus, the new encyclical does not and cannot reach infallible dimensions. To follow this teaching is binding on the Catholic because the authority enjoys the guidance of the Spirit. This is a presumption and like every presumption, it may be overcome by more cogent arguments or by a process of normal historical evolution. This has happened in history. Therefore, an individual Catholic may enjoy a degree of dissent as a matter of conscience. But this dissent must be humble, ready to return to the presumption once shown his error, prayerful, intelligent after diligent investigation and above all private. Such dissent may never be openly public which can open the dissenter to the sin of scandal. Dissent

from authentic, noninfallible Church teaching must therefore always be respectful, humble, open to change, prayerful and private.

Pope's Words Not Read

It is surprising how many (both Catholic and non-Catholic) condemn the Pope without ever having read what he said. In the past, I dare say that not one critic in a thousand has read Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* (the so called "birth control" encyclical of 1968) which developed a whole theory of sexual, conjugal love. The secular press never seems to get it right: the Pope never condemned birth control (to bring into this world only those children which a couple may economically, psychologically and educationally support is a moral obligation); only artificial means of contraception have been condemned — a totally different question.

It is also surprising that some 25 years after this encyclical people like Jane Fonda and Dr. J. Elders can slander the Catholic Church and the Pope by claiming that both are responsible for overpopulation and ecological disaster when they oppose artificial contraception and abortion! It is, according to these critics, unchristian to oppose a woman's right to an abortion. Never mind that empirical studies summarized in the *British Medical Journal* in 1993 give the complete lie to the slur. This study and many like it found that natural planning is an effective method of birth control and the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to artificial contraception will not lead to overpopulation.

What is truly surprising is the blindness of such critics to what the sexual revolution has wrought. Once the pill and other contraceptives became widely accepted and used, the sexual roof fell in: one in four births is illegitimate, almost 2 million abortions per year, mostly as a backup for contraception, one in four adult Americans suffers from a venereal disease, 1.1 in every 2 marriages ends in divorce, sexual intercourse at an ever younger age (14) when young adults are least capable of integrating love and sexuality, the acceptance of homosexuality as alternative lifestyle with all its legal and social ramifications, 2 million new sexually-physically abused children per year, a significant increase in spousal abuse, an increasing inability to establish faithful, long term relationships due to earlier sexuality, etc., etc., etc.

This is only a cumulative list of the sexual decadence to which this society and culture has sunk. The media (TV, movies, books, pornography) only reflect this culture; they do not create it and to blame the media for our sexual degeneracy is to put the cart before the horse.

The deeply ironic thing about these statistics is that as Catholics dissented (about 70% of Catholics interviewed in almost every poll show this dissent particularly on artificial birth control) from the absolute sexual teaching of their spiritual leader, their own statistics become comparable to those of other Americans who practice artificial birth control: rates of divorce, abortion, pre/extra-marital relationships, etc. are now mostly the same for Catholics as for other groups: Dissent and similar statistics on sexual deviance are in direct

proportion. The divorce rate of those Catholics who practice only natural planning is less than 3 percent opposed to 50 percent of those who practice artificial contraception.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, the Pope stands firm on religious as well as on rational grounds that certain activities are inherently wrong and those who perform them (whether they be Catholic or non-Catholic) must pay a frightful price for their moral deviation. The list given above is only cumulative. Those who have opposed this basic teaching of moral absolutes, are now seeing the results of this rejection everywhere in American society.

Without Sin, Yet Wrong

One would have preferred another term than *intrinsic dishonestum* to describe certain actions which are always and objectively wrong (contraception, pre and extramarital sex, homosexual activity, abortion, masturbation, pedophilia — to restrict ourselves to the sexual). A true translation of *inhonestum* is not "dishonest" (which implies an interior characterization) but "disorientated" or "deviant" or simply "wrong". We must clearly distinguish this objective-subjective order in order to distinguish those who are invincibly ignorant of this objective order and who act accordingly. They are without sin but not without deviation from the order willed by God. Such deviation is responsible for our present sexual wasteland, which has come about in spite of the good will of those who practice such deviance.

This is that part of the present encyclical which will be least understood among our contemporaries. Certain actions fall short of the moral order — even when done in good faith — and bring about corruption and degeneracy in civil society. The Pope simply says that so many of our modern problems have this as their central origin: modernity's inability to posit and hold objective norms and standards of morality applicable to all and everywhere.

Something is radically wrong with American culture and the Pope, in *Veritatis Splendor*, states the reason quite simply: it is a rejection of all objective, absolute truths about sexual activity. This teaching of the Pope is not new. The only thing new is the clear result of such deviant practices in the culture and lives of those, Catholic and non-Catholic, who have rejected this basic teaching in their lives. It is a sort of argument *a Tergo*: peoples' and a culture's philosophy can be deciphered from the lived reality of the lives of its people.

As to the dissenters in the Church, the Pope, without fulminations or threats simply states the obvious: No one is obligated to be a Catholic. The Pope as head of the Church simply teaches what Christ taught. This is one of the crucial characteristics which distinguish Catholic from all other Christian denominations. This does not make a Catholic better; it does however make him a Catholic. It is basic Catholic belief that in an imperfect but real way, orthodox doctrine and authentic morals as taught by this person within the Church is what Christ teaches. Those who do not agree may join other Churches or no Church. The Pope condemns no one but he makes it clear that those who publicly dissent from this authentic Catholic moral teaching have no right to the name "Catholic".

In addition, the Pope in *Veritatis Splendor* makes it very clear that this teaching about an objective moral order is also based on reason. It is a traditional teaching of the Catholic Church that the use of reason has not been totally corrupted (only wounded and in need of the strength of revelation) and that with humility and effort, reason can arrive at some aspects of the truth. The Pope's argument in *Veritatis Splendor* is that unless there are some moral absolutes, the relativism which we see in secular society today will destroy all aspects of a firm morality. There will be and can be no standards by which we can judge right and wrong, goodness and evil, meaning and meaninglessness.

Even the most secular moralist or thinker on public affairs should be worried about the state of cultural-sexual affairs in this country. The situation gets worse as moral relativism becomes more acceptable. But unless people have firm moral standards by which to guide their human activities, the confusion and directionlessness of the individual and of society, become overwhelming. If we have no such standards, how can we forbid a pedophile from teaching children in school or an active homosexual from becoming a Scout leader? The results of the sexual revolution, based on the complete rejection of any firm, objective moral standards, can be seen everywhere. This decadence is above all typified by the disintegration of the American family which is the very building cell of any decent society.

Reaction to *Splendor*

The response of the eminent Catholic moral theologian, Richard McCormick to *Splendor in America* (10/30/93) was precisely what the Pope was talking about.

The reasoning of moralists like Fr. McCormick is intelligent, to the point and intellectually persuasive. Except that the premise of his argument is in error. His proportionalist argument is always and logically *within* the moral decision; in fact, human circumstances are within or part of the moral decision itself. In other words, the materiality of the act is never sufficient in and of itself to determine its moral nature; such materiality (e.g. contraception, sterilization, masturbation) needs a human context by which we can judge its morality.

One of McCormick's examples is taken from masturbation: the act of masturbation of itself (materiality) may be done for selfish pleasure in which case it is wrong; but it may also be done in the context of testing for fertility in which case the act may be morally correct. In other words, in his own words, proportionalists are simply saying "that an action cannot be judged morally wrong simply by looking at the material happening or at its object in a very narrow or restricted sense. This is precisely what tradition has done in certain categories (e.g. contraception, sterilization). It does this in no other area." (page 10)

My point here is that upon further reflection, perhaps tradition should have applied the logic of its own principles to other areas as well. Take, for example, the killing of a human being. Tradition, as Fr. McCormick correctly noted, has not always called this murder. The intentional killing of a human being in self

defense or in a legitimate conflict, has been termed justified while the taking of a human life for other reasons (e.g. theft, hate, money, revenge) has been considered evil. Fr. McCormick would conclude that the moral quality (moral action) of intentionally killing a human being is determined by one's intention and circumstances.

My point is simply that tradition has not gone far enough (which the early church clearly recognized). To intentionally kill a human being is always and everywhere an evil, even in the case of self defense because it destroys the image of God even in an evil person. Self defense and justified war simply make the objective evil less evil in fact; but evil it remains. One could perhaps blame this on original sin or human diversity, but that does not change the evil of the act of intentionally killing a human being.

But actions like murder, theft, and lies are more difficult to deal with because their materiality is at once both act and intent; therefore their materiality is not intrinsically related to natural law. This, of course, is not the case with sexuality, which is also why tradition has always considered sexual actions much more tied to their materiality.

Clearly the major area of contention here is that the Pope, in *Splendor*, considers certain actions intrinsically evil irrespective of the intent of the perpetrator. This is reflected in civil law where the intent of a human act may reduce the culpability—punishment for an act which is considered materially evil (eg. first and second degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter). But this is another question with which we cannot deal here. The law forbids evil; it cannot mandate much good.

The Pope gives some examples: abortion, contraception, homosexual activity, torture, genocide. We could reverse any of these: when is it morally justified to torture a human being, or murder him; when is it morally justified to use artificial contraception or have an abortion? The Pope says, never. Here is the bone of contention between *Splendor* and moralists like Father McCormick.

The abortion and contraception questions are both at the forefront of moral debate in American society. If we take as a given that the unborn are humans in being (some would simply deny this, so with them there cannot be the same kind of moral argument), then it is always and everywhere an evil to kill him/her.

Some would object that abortion may be justified to save the life of the mother or when it is the result of incest or rape. But the nature of the act is not changed by considering the motive of the actor. The act remains the direct and intentional killing of a human being, which is an intrinsic evil no matter what the intent of the one who does it. It may be that the moral culpability of the woman is lessened when her life is at risk or when she has been raped, but her act remains intrinsically evil no matter what the intent, because it directly intends the killing and death of an innocent human being.

Even more troublesome is the intentional use of artificial contraception in lovemaking between a husband and wife, if I may restrict the argument. What if natural planning does not work or is too risky for the health of the woman or whose economic situation and number of born children, makes the conception of more children burdensome or even dangerous? These circumstances do not change the nature (materiality) of what is happening even though the intent in

using artificial contraception may lessen the moral culpability of the one who does the act. The contraceptive act is morally wrong because it destroys by dividing what God has joined in the nature and structure of the sexual act. And if it be answered that the same intent is had by avoiding conception in Natural Family Planning (NFP), then this is granted except that in NFP there is a profound respect for what the creator has created; in fact, NFP is making use of only what God has ordained (infertile periods), and is not destroying the unique reality of what God has created.

All this may seem like hairsplitting to a society and culture which has taken sexual activity as the *summum bonum*. Sexual activity is not the supreme good of marriage because marriage is created by an exchange of mutual love expressed in sexuality; but its heart always remains love even when for whatever reason (e.g. degeneration or nerve disease of the male penis), sexual activity no longer remains possible.

The Pope, in *Splendor*, holds to the respect due to the natural processes (natural law) of the sexual function. His point is that this function must be respected and that we cannot do anything we wish with so delicate a balance of our nature. Its abuse has come home to destroy the people who have tried to bend or divide it from its intrinsic meaning (love, procreation). Having separated effectively the love-unity and procreation-openness to life via contraception, our culture has suffered sexual disaster. What the Pope predicted 25 years ago would happen once the unitive and procreative dimensions of human sexuality are separated, has proven to be all too true.

My point here is an argument *a tergo*. That is, what seemed reasonable 25 years ago to the theologians and the "Birth Control Commission" set up by the Pope, has proven disastrous since. Once the procreative was separated intentionally from the loving language of the marital relationship by artificial means, the result has been extended to all other forms of sexual liaisons: unmarried, homosexual and all other forms of sexual perversion. Consider the history of sexuality since 1968 which we have already enumerated above.

As one last reflection, the whole abortion movement has become overwhelming because it is now used mostly as a backup for contraception. The cases of rape, incest and defective fetus are less than 1% of the reasons for abortion today. The Pope foresaw this in par. 14 of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and the prophecy has been directly fulfilled in the plurality opinion of Justice Kennedy of 1992 in *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*. The reason why the court cannot overturn *Roe v. Wade*, said Justice Kennedy, is that the American people and particularly women, *have culturally accepted abortion as a backup for contraception*.

Those who think that contraception and abortion are not mutually dependent, should read the plurality opinion of Justice Kennedy in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), the case which reaffirmed *Roe v. Wade*. [We must] "... face the fact that for two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized [their] intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail."

In other words, according to Justice Kennedy and his colleagues, Americans

today are culturally defined, their self understanding — in the words of K. Rahner — is now inextricably defined in function of abortion as a backup for contraception. We are no longer in the realm of the contraception mentality; we are now culturally defined as Americans in the abortion-contraception mode. Abortion-contraception are ecliptic of American character. How foolish those who thought they could carefully divide the two by the concept of "proportionality" as Fr. McCormick would have us do.

The holding of in *Splendor* is a hard saying, as was that of Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*. "And they no longer walked him" as *John* says of those followers of Jesus after he gave them a hard saying about the Eucharist in the sixth chapter of his gospel.

Contrary to Fr. McCormick, it is artificial contraception which has brought us sexual disaster and death. *Veritatis Splendor* brings us a very difficult but hopefilled message of love. "By their fruits you will know them." The overwhelming number of Catholics in America who have dissented from *Humanae Vitae*, and now from *Veritatis Splendor*, are reaping the fruits of their dissent: Catholics have divorce, abortion and illegitimacy rates comparable to other, non Catholic, Americans.

The defense of *Veritatis Splendor*, therefore, must therefore be both theoretical and practical.