

Truth & the truth-seeker

Shock waves have shaken the Church in recent decades. Things just aren't the way they used to be. The world has changed dramatically, and fast.

Society is characterized by extraordinary plurality. A young person growing up today is confronted by an array of alternative lifestyles, opinions and beliefs which an older generation simply did not know. The Church can no longer presume a society based on a Christian ethic.

Plurality can be a good thing when it allows us to appreciate the multi-faceted richness of truth. It can also make life confusing when lies and half-truths thread their way through the many issues that compete for our attention.

It is into this complex sea of opinion that John Paul II boldly sets sail in his 1993 encyclical (letter): *Veritatis Splendor* (Latin for 'The Splendour of Truth').

"As a ten year old I remember calling a classmate names. I felt terrible afterwards. I knew I had picked on a weaker kid."

"I think our government has a moral obligation to act on behalf of this country's indigenous population."

"I love my boyfriend. Why shouldn't I sleep with him."

"There are some shady practices going on at work which are making me feel very uncomfortable."

What's right? What's wrong? Whether we be seven or seventy years of age, such questions remain fundamental to our daily lives. From the school playground to the courts of law, from the bedroom to the corporate boardroom, each of us must ask, "What must I do?" and take responsibility for the consequences of our choices.

This is the topic addressed by Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*. Written in 1993 to all the bishops of the Church, it deals not with specific moral issues but the very foundation of the moral life of the Christian.

To digest a Church document it is important to understand the context in which it is written. *Veritatis Splendor* is written in an era of enormous plurality on many fronts. In fact many people, including those of no particular religious persuasion, admit that things have got out of hand. Today you can ascribe to just about any value system and justify your actions with the catchcry "You have your opinion and I have mine. Neither of us are right or wrong, we're just different."

This situation has thrown the Church into 'shock.' It has caused some people to react with an exaggerated conservatism, while others jump on the 'anything goes' liberal bandwagon. It is into this complex situation that the Pope sets out to establish some clear sign posts arising from the experience and reflections of Christian tradition. His goal is to help people distinguish between the many voices competing for their allegiance. Through *Veritatis Splendor* he is calling us back to some very basic tenets of human dignity.

Veritatis Splendor is significant in that it is the first time the teaching authority of the Church has made such a comprehensive statement on the fundamental principles of Christian morality. At this time in our history, the Church feels a responsibility to give strong guidance. It cannot remain silent when people's lives are being harmed by the confusion of value systems. Of course, as a Church community we cannot 'make' anyone accept Catholic teachings. But we can clearly state the gospel principles by which we stand and invite people to make a choice.

Dip into the document

Veritatis Splendor is sold as a small paperback from many Catholic bookstores for just a few dollars. Or find it on line at the Vatican website: vatican.va

A number of commentaries are available to help the lay reader decipher the technical terminology. E.g., William F. Maestri, *A Guide for the Study of Veritatis Splendor* (St Paul Books & Media, 1994).

A curly Question

“Jan and I are feeling restless. We have a happy marriage, good jobs, our children are all successful in their studies... Yet there’s something missing in our lives. It’s very difficult to pin-point.”

Have you ever felt a thirst for ‘more’ out of life? Have you ever asked ‘what next?’ as you contemplate your future? Do you sometimes experience a desire to grow closer to God? The gospel parable of the Rich Young Man (Mt. 19:16-22) is about one such man who felt drawn to a deeper, more spiritual awareness of life’s choices and who approached Jesus with this question:

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life...?”

This is the opening scene of Chapter 1 of *Veritatis Splendor*. What a wonderfully positive starting point to begin a document about moral principles; that is, with the story of the restless searchings of a young man’s heart.

The rich young man senses a connection between knowing and doing what is good and the meaning

of life. His search draws him closer to the person of Jesus. He is attracted to ‘the Good’ that is both his origin and destiny. He aspires to do good because he is made in the image and likeness of the one who is Good. The young man is intrinsically good.

“...keep the commandments...”

This is Jesus’ first answer. To untangle oneself from clearly destructive actions (such as murder, adultery, theft) is the beginning of true freedom. But this is only the beginning. Morality is not simply about staying on the right side of the line, it is about reaching for the greatest potential of our humanity. It is not just about what we must not do, but who we can be! The rich young man senses this and is not satisfied with Jesus’ answer.

“...I have done all these...”

Conscious of the young man’s yearnings for something beyond this initial interpretation, Jesus invites him to extend himself towards the deeper possibilities which the commandments open up. While the ten commandments

are a basic cornerstone of the Christian life, they are not to be seen as the limit. The maturity of the Christian life is the same radical self-giving that Jesus displayed on the cross; giving one’s ‘all’ to the service of others; ridding oneself of all distractions which interfere with our surrender to God’s love. This is what is behind Jesus’ response:

“...give up all your possessions and come follow me.”

The radical nature of this call is seen in the young man’s grief. We do not know exactly why ‘he went away sorrowful’ except that somehow Jesus’ call was not what he expected. Even Jesus’ disciples were taken aback by their master’s words. But Jesus only reminds them of God’s power. Some things seem impossible to us, but ‘with God all things are possible.’

Wisdom

“At some point as a child it dawned on me that the Church’s laws were a bit like my parents’ love. Sometimes their rules seemed to spoil my fun, but for a protective reason (‘Don’t put your finger in the power-socket, you’ll get electrocuted!’). The Church’s moral stance isn’t about inhibiting my lifestyle, it’s for the good of my whole personhood – emotionally, physically, spiritually.

My friends at uni dismiss the moral teachings of their Catholic upbringing. But I have seen so many of them get hurt as time goes by. It’s awful watching these lovely people become negative and cynical. It seems like everyone’s hurting, but no one has the guts to say, “Hey, maybe there is some wisdom in the Church’s teaching after all.” (Tania)

What is your question to Jesus?

There is something of the rich young man in each of us, for the human quest for meaning and fulfilment is essentially a religious yearning for God. Chapter 1 of Veritatis Splendor urges the genuine seeker of truth to:

Seek the person of Christ, not just an impersonal ‘answer;’

Realize that God’s goodness is revealed not only in the attainment of moral perfection, but in the very questions which inspire the human search for Truth;

See the search for truth as an invitation to faith in Christ.

Chapter 1 also helps to clarify the Church’s approach to morality. Whereas once the Church emphasized the act, today it is more conscious of the person who acts, that is, a more holistic approach. This is not a negation of what has gone before, but simply a development in moral understanding.

Dare to be Different

Equal in the eyes of God

Today we hear a lot about the importance of personal freedom and the rights of the individual. Well and good! It is possible, however, to take this idea too far. 'My rights' can become an absolute value and take precedence over the good of everybody else.

Chapter 2 of Veritatis Splendor enters this discussion of freedom and conscience. It upholds the Christian belief in the existence of 'objective truth.' That is, no matter what value systems one might humanly construct, there remains an ultimate system of values existing outside ourselves. At the end of the day, no matter what one might claim to the contrary, God is God and Truth is Truth. A number of popular moral attitudes are challenged by this stance:

"Whatever I think is good. Whatever I do in good conscience, is good."

Not necessarily. The Church asserts that a person must always do what he/she sincerely believes to be right and good. However this does not mean that the choice always will be right and good. To take an extreme example: Hitler no doubt thought he was right in what he did for Germany. What he did was to create a murderous regime without a shred of moral credibility.

"It's OK under the circumstances."

Some actions can never be right (we call these 'intrinsically wrong') because they oppose or interfere with the fundamentals of love and life. For example, not matter what one's motive and regardless of the outcome, deliberate killing of the innocent is intrinsically wrong. There is an inherent contradiction in the very idea of using the death of an innocent person as a means to bring about a good outcome.

"If I am at peace with myself, it must be right."

Being 'at peace with oneself' is a sign of God's presence and can be an indicator of a choice that resonates with God's love. However, 'being at peace' is not an infallible sign. I might be at peace

because I don't know any better, or because I have refused to face up to certain issues, or because I don't want to be challenged. God can also disturb and unsettle us...so as to bring us to a deeper peace.

"I didn't intend to hurt anyone."

The human person is a unity, not separate components of body, mind, soul. I cannot do one thing with my body and say, "But I didn't intend that action." I can't fire a gun at a woman and say, "I didn't intend to hurt her." I can't viciously criticize a man and say, "I didn't mean to make him feel badly about himself."

Further, we are social beings, therefore what we do (or don't do) has an effect on the whole human family. To claim that my actions are purely private and that their morality depends on my intentions is to ignore the bigger picture.

"I can't help it, I was brought up that way."

As formative as our parents and teachers are, ultimately each of us is made in God's image, not our parents. To believe that our conditioning is all-determining is to deny our free will and uniqueness as created and destined for God.

"All my friends believe sex before marriage is OK. When is the Church going to face reality?"

Some people treat morality like fashion. They follow whatever is the 'in look' this season. The Church does not support such a whimsical approach (called 'relativism'). The Church refutes attitudes like these because they apply a radical subjectivity. The individual becomes the central point of reference instead of God. They deny the existence of a universal truth which can be known to all who open their hearts and sincerely search.

As Christians we believe in the existence of timeless truth that grounds all reality. Our ability to comprehend and express this truth grows and deepens with time, but the essentials are there to be discovered by all people in every age.

Take care with conscience

Veritatis Splendor reminds us that the exercise of one's conscience is not simply about 'doing my own thing.' It is that fundamental law written upon our hearts, which stirs us to act according to love and to avoid the things which draw us away from God.

In order to recognize and respond to this inner law guiding our hearts, we have a duty to form and inform our conscience in a Christian way: with prayer, with the influence of our faith community and with sound information (not just the opinions of the secular press).

As John Henry Newman put it: "Conscience has rights because it has duties."

A challenging optimism permeates Veritatis Splendor; a belief in the capacity of the human spirit to rise above its predicament, and the belief that our moral laws are not just romantic ideals but a joyful reality that can and does break into our lives in tangible ways.

The **Splendour** of truth

If you are, say, an accomplished sportsman or businesswoman, you will know that those who make it to the top are the ones who make sacrifices along the way. When others were sleeping, you were up at 5am for swimming training. When others were blaming the recession, you were adapting your product to a different market.

Now it's only an analogy, but in Chapter 3 of *Veritatis Splendor* the Pope is saying something along these lines: To be a great lover of God and people, to live the life of God in the fullest way possible, you have to make sacrifices along the way. Sure, there will be plenty of people who will say, "That's ridiculous," "You're a fanatic," and so on. But Christians are people who courageously aim for the big dream! To be Christian is to aspire to a magnificent view of life; one which allows us to see each person as infinitely precious, originating from and destined for the love-life of God.

Love frees us to make difficult choices

It was the security of God's love that freed Jesus of Nazareth to make the most difficult choice a person can ever make: the willingness to lay down his life for his friends. It is in the crucified Christ that the true meaning of freedom is revealed. Our faith in Christ calls us to act with the same self-giving love. Our lives, therefore, become a witness to our faith before God and people. This witness is often tested in the face of pressures. There comes a time when the choice between God

and evil, between mediocrity and the fullness of life, confronts us with particular force and the gospel value can only be chosen at a great cost. For some the cost has been martyrdom. Our Christian tradition celebrates the heroism of people like John the Baptist, Thomas More, Archbishop Romero, Jeanie Donovan, all who devoted their lives to God's laws even at the cost of their lives. Society might call such examples foolhardy, wasteful, stubborn. But from a Christian point of view such actions are dramatic testimony to the truth: God is God. Truth is Truth. No matter how we try to reinterpret reality to fit our 'comfort zones,' the presence of the crucified Christ beckons us to offer our lives with radical, self-giving love.

By upholding such a courageous stance, the Church offers all humanity a powerful tool for bringing about world peace. Proposed solutions to the world's immense social problems will come and go as they try to compromise the truth (e.g., Marxism, totalitarian regimes, capitalism). But ultimately, only a transcendent view of the human person as created by God and destined for eternal life will ensure a truly just and humane society.

In every sphere of life (e.g., economics, politics, family relationships) we must do our utmost to live by God's plan. Some people will regard the Church's teaching as just an ideal. They see it as something to which we aspire, but also something to be readily adapted and watered-down to so-called concrete human possibilities. But this is not a true interpretation of the

The decision

"I was sitting in a cafe chatting with a friend. I was 18, pregnant, and contemplating my future as single parent. I hate to admit it, but there was one moment when I actually contemplated aborting my child. As I look at my little son now, I can't believe I could have thought of this. But I did. The possibility hung there for one long, frightening moment before I rejected it." (Jennifer)

Discussion point

Describe a time when your gospel values were challenged by a competing value system. How did you respond to the situation at hand?

Church's stance. It is true, of course, that as human beings we fail and, by acknowledging our weakness, we can receive God's forgiveness and start afresh. This is very different, however, from using our failings as an excuse to justify our weaknesses.

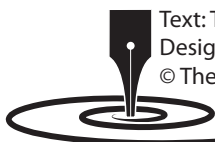
Live the dream!

Christians are a people with a dream. And a choice. We can aim our lives at the Christian vision, or we can settle for less. No one is saying the choice is easy. Nor that it happens all at once. But we are not programmed robots. We are free. And we can claim that freedom, bit by bit, day by day, through each choice, each action.

Far from being a negative thing, to live a moral life which is true to our faith in Christ is to allow the beauty of the truth to shine forth, a liberating and attractive force which cannot help but touch the world with God's love.

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