

## **In The School of Mary**

(Papal documents condensed by Deacon William Wagner)

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## **Pope John Paul II**

*Veritatis Splendor*, The Splendor of Truth, August 6, 1993.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In view of Pope Benedict XVI's recent comment concerning the tyranny of relativism so pervasive in especially the western world today, I concluded that it was useful to continue with this particular work of John Paul II. This encyclical addresses itself to the specific issue that truth does matter. The developed countries of the world seem especially susceptible to the confusion created when objective truth is either ignored or denied. A spiritual impoverishment results. One that is seriously detrimental to the very souls of these countries. It is perhaps more destructive even than the extreme physical poverty experienced by third world countries.

The short preamble of the encyclical says that *The Splendor of Truth* shines forth in the works of the Creator, especially in man created in the image and likeness of God. We are reminded at the very beginning of this encyclical that "truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom." It is only when man knows the truth about himself that he can understand himself. Man must know that he is made in the image and likeness of God. In a sense he is God's manifestation in the world, a veritable theophany. In this light we must say again that truth does matter!

### **Jesus Christ, the True Light that Enlightens Everyone**

As a result of original sin man is constantly tempted to turn his gaze away from the living and true God. He, in effect, is being prompted to exchange the truth for a lie. The Holy Father notes how man's intellect weakened by sin is so given over to darkness. He thus the more easily opens himself to relativism and skepticism. He goes in search of freedom apart from truth. John Paul reminds us that, even so, in the depths of the heart of man there always remain a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain to a full knowledge of it.

No one escapes the fundamental questions: What must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil? The splendor of truth shining deep within the human spirit makes possible the answer. Really, the decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral question in particular, is Jesus Christ himself. Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word is light shed on the mystery of man himself. It is Christ who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love for humankind.

The Holy Father says that the Church for its part offers to everyone the answer that comes from Jesus Christ and his Gospel. She continually examines the signs of the times and interprets them in the light of the Gospel in a way appropriate to the era. The Church's pastors in communion with the Successor of Peter assist man with their authoritative teaching. It is on this path of morality that the way of salvation is open to all. Even those, who through

no fault of their own and in sincerity of heart find themselves outside the visible confines of the Church, nonetheless may work out their salvation. Vatican II affirmed that whatever of goodness and truth are found in them is seen already as a preparation for the Gospel.

### **The Purpose of the Present Encyclical**

Pope John Paul reminds us that in Christ's name and with his authority the Popes and Bishops over the years have exhorted, explained, and made judgments concerning moral teachings in the different spheres of human life. Their teaching represents a constant deepening of knowledge in this regard.

However, the Pope feels the need these days to reflect on the whole of the Church's moral teaching. We encounter today no mere limited, sporadic or occasional moral dissent. There is in vogue a systematic calling into question many traditional and fundamental moral doctrines. The Church's teaching on the natural law is one of those. For some, the Church has become a voice of mere exhortation. Dissent from the traditional teachings of the Church is found even within seminary faculties.

In order to contramand these dangerous tendencies within the Church, John Paul decided to write. He wished to safeguard sound teaching and set forth certain aspects of sound doctrine. He did this to protect the moral life of the faithful, the communion of the Church and to sustain a just and fraternal social life. The Pope delayed in publishing the encyclical in order to await the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In the words of the Pope, "It represents a complete and systematic exposition of Christian moral teaching." Recognizing the *Catechism* for what it is, he seeks to limit himself to certain fundamental moral teachings of the Church. In short, the encyclical's purpose is to set forth moral teaching based upon Sacred Scripture and the living Apostolic Tradition. Likewise it wishes "to shed light on the presuppositions and consequences of the dissent that this teaching has met."

## **CHAPTER I "Teacher, What Good Must I Do...?(Mt 19:16)**

### **Christ and the Answer to the Question About Morality**

The Holy Father says that in the rich young man we can recognize every person who, consciously or not, approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality. Critically, the Pope points out that for the young man, the question is not so much about rules to be followed, but about the full meaning of life. It is the quest in the heart of every individual. The Pope says that in order to make this "encounter" with Christ possible, God willed his Church. The Church serves this single end; that each may find Christ so Christ "may walk with each person the path of life."

The question raised by the rich young came out of the sincerity of his heart. It was a question about the moral good which must be done and about eternal life. People today have the need to ask the same questions about good and evil. Christ is the Teacher, the Risen One, he who has life in himself. John Paul wants us to know that Christ is always present in his Church and in the world. For man to understand himself he must draw near to Christ. Not only should we pay attention to the question asked by the rich young man but also the answer given by the Lord.

Jesus in his turn questions the young man concerning his asking about the good. Jesus tells him there is only one who is good. "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." The Holy Father points out that the

answer rests really in the only true good that there is, God alone. The Pope tells us that only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself.

Jesus brings the question about morally good action back to its religious foundation, to the acknowledgement of God, our final end and happiness. The Church, instructed by the Teacher's words, believes that man has as the ultimate purpose of his life to live "for the praise of God's glory."

The Pope explains that what man is and what he must do becomes clear as soon as God reveals himself. God makes himself known and acknowledged as the One who "alone is good." He promises to walk among his people and he will be their God.

The answer of Christ that there is only one good brings us to the first commandment. God is worshipped for his infinite holiness. The Holy Father says that acknowledging the Lord, as God is the very core, the heart of the Law. He further points out that human fulfillment of the law comes about as a gift of God; sharing in divine Goodness as it is communicated in Jesus.

Only God can answer the question about the good because he is the Good. The Pope tells us that God has already given us the answer about the good. It has been inscribed in our hearts, the natural law. It is nothing other than the light of understanding given us to know what must be done and what must be avoided. The Ten Commandments were as a promise and sign of the New Covenant wherein the law would be written in a new way on the human heart.

Jesus turns from the question of "the good" and now tells the young man that if he wishes eternal life, he must keep the commandments. God's commandments show us the path to life and they lead to it. In the New Covenant the commandments are linked to the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven. That Kingdom is expressed as eternal life, a participation in the very life of God.

It is not enough for the young man. He wishes to know which commandments he must keep. Jesus does not attempt a definitive answer where the commandments are concerned. John Paul says that Jesus wishes to draw the young man's attention to the centrality of the Decalogue where all the other precepts are concerned. In particular Jesus uses commandments from the second part of the Decalogue to draw attention to the singular dignity of the human person, the only creature that God has wanted for its own sake.

As we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church the Decalogue is part of divine revelation, teaching us man's true humanity. It casts light on man's essential duties and indirectly on the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person. Pope John Paul details how the commandments represent the basic condition for love of neighbor. At the same time he says that they are also the proof of that love. They are the first necessary step on the journey towards freedom. It is only the beginning of freedom and not perfect freedom.

Love of God and love of neighbor were highlighted as well for the teacher of the law who encountered Christ. Jesus told him to do this and he would live. The teacher of the law is provoked to ask just who his neighbor was. Jesus replied with the beautiful parable of the Good Samaritan. The two commandments on which depend the Law and the Prophets are seen here as profoundly connected and mutually related. The Apostle John points out how to say that we love God and then not love our neighbor makes us out to be liars. He concludes by saying that he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 Jn 4:20)

As the basis for the pursuit of perfection, the Holy Father continues his consideration of Christ's challenge to the rich young man. It is in Christ that the whole law and the prophets are brought to fulfillment. "You search the scriptures; and it is they that bear witness to me." (Jn 5:39) Christ is the center of the economy of salvation, the living and eternal link between the Old and New Covenants.

Jesus brings God's commandments to fulfillment by interiorizing their demands drawing out their full meaning. Love of neighbor springs from a loving heart. The commandments are a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love. John Paul reminds us how Jesus would say, "You have heard it said to the men of old... ..but I say to you." Jesus would always amplify and deepen the understanding of the particular commandment. Jesus himself is the living fulfillment of that law inasmuch as he fulfills its authentic meaning by the total gift of himself.

So, "If you wish to be perfect" (Mt 19:21) Jesus invites the rich young man to enter upon the way of perfection. This invitation, says John Paul, must be read within the context of the whole of the Gospel, within the context of the Beatitudes and the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. These beatitudes speak to basic attitudes and dispositions of life. They are not necessarily in lock step with the commandments, but nevertheless they are very much in harmony with them. The Pope sees the beatitudes as a veritable self-portrait of Christ himself.

Jesus' conversation with the rich young man helps us to grasp the conditions for the moral growth of each of us, who have been called to perfection. We can't do it by ourselves. The Holy Father shows us how mature human freedom (a natural foundation) must be followed upon by God's gift of grace. (A supernatural invitation, "Come follow me.")

Perfection demands a maturity of self-giving to which human freedom is called. As we see in the case of the rich young man it is indeed an invitation: "*If you wish* to be perfect." These words reveal the dynamic of freedom's growth towards maturity and bear witness at the same time of the fundamental relationship between freedom and the divine law. "Human freedom and God's law," says John Paul, "are not in opposition; on the contrary they appeal to one another." The follower of Christ must know that his vocation is to freedom.

Yet, despite our sins having been destroyed by Baptism, there remains a residual weakness. To the extent that we serve God we are free, while to the extent that we follow the law of sin, we are still slaves.

As the Holy Father continues to urge us along the path to perfection, he recalls that to live "by the flesh" is to experience God's law as a burden, a denial and a restriction of our freedom. Whereas to live "by the spirit" is to feel an interior urge, a genuine "necessity" not to stop at the minimum demands of the Law, but to live them in their "fullness." The invitation, "go sell your possessions ...give to the poor, ...and you will have treasure in heaven," is meant for everyone. "Come follow me" is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God.

The "sequela Christi," the following of Christ, has both a *way* and a *content*. It is the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality. Radically, it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father. Thus the Pope tells us that to imitate the Son, "the image of the invisible God," means to imitate the Father.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you... By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn 13:34-35) John Paul explains that the word, "as" not only requires our *imitation* of Jesus and of his love but also indicates for us the *degree* of Jesus' love and of

the love with which we are called to love one another. The Pope draws the conclusion that Jesus' way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts, constitute the moral rule of the Christian life. It is his "*new*" *commandment*.

The Holy Father points out another extremely important element. He tells us that the *following of Christ* is not an outward imitation since it touches us at the very depths of our being. Being a follower of Christ means *becoming conformed to him* who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross. To be conformed to the Lord, having the very heart of Jesus, is the *effect of grace*, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

Saint Augustine exclaimed that in baptism we not only become Christians, but Christ. "...Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ." Sharing in the Eucharist, the sacrament of the New Covenant, is for Pope John Paul the culmination of our assimilation to Christ, the source of "eternal life," the source and power of that complete gift of self. According to St. Paul, it is what we are commanded to commemorate in *liturgy and life*. (1Cor 11:26)

The rich young man is taken aback at Jesus' answer because in truth his "command" transcends human aspirations and abilities. Even the Lord's disciples are astounded and they will question him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus' answer is direct, "With men it is impossible but with God all things are possible." (Mt 19:26)

In this same chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus, rejecting the "right to divorce," turns our attention to a "beginning" more fundamental, more authoritative than the law of Moses: *God's original plan for mankind*. The Holy Father says that it was a plan that, after sin, was not able to be lived up to. So because of the "hardness of your heart" Moses allowed divorce. ...But it was not that way from the beginning." (cf Mt 19:8)

Pope John Paul is at pains to point out how Jesus, referring specifically to the charism of celibacy "for the Kingdom of Heaven," says: "Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it is given." (Mt 19:11) By our own strength alone it is not possible for us to imitate and live out the love of Christ. *We become capable of this kind of love only by virtue of a gift received*. The Pope here reminds us that Christ's gift is his Spirit, whose first fruit is Charity (cf Gal 5:22).

The Apostle Paul invites us to consider the relationship between the (Old) Law and grace (the New Law). It is in faith that we have been made righteous in Christ. The Holy Father reflects on how St. Paul recognizes that the Law demanded a righteousness that it could not of itself give. It is found by every believer to be revealed and granted by the Lord Jesus. The Gospel of John tells us, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (Jn 1:17) The Holy Father finally says that the gift of eternal life is link to the gift of grace and the gift of the Spirit. The authentic and original perfection toward which we are directed is opened then to us exclusively by grace, by the gift of God, by his love.

The Holy Father, along with others, sees an inseparable connection between the Lord's grace and human freedom, between *gift* and *task*. St. Augustine put it this way, "Grant what you command and command what you will." St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ. This New Law is not content to say what must be done, but also gives the power to "do what is true." (cf Jn 3:21) St. John Chrysostom centuries before had said that the Apostles came down from the "mount" of Pentecost carrying, not like Moses, tablets of stone in their hands but carrying the Holy Spirit in their hearts, having become by grace "a living law, a living book."

To attain to eternal life, Jesus promised to be with us always. (cf Mt 28:20) Christ's relevance for his people is shown in and through his Church to whom he promised the gift of the Spirit. This Holy Spirit would instruct the

disciples in the ways of the truth. The Lord thus entrusted the task of teaching and interpreting the prescriptions of his commands to the Apostles and their successors. Further, they were to be protected by the Spirit of truth himself.

Included in the moral catechesis of the Apostles was also an ethical teaching with precise rules of behavior. From the very beginning the Apostles concerned themselves with the right conduct of Christians. These Jewish/Gentile Christians differed from their pagan neighbors in faith, liturgy and moral behavior. The Holy Father says that the Church is in fact a communion of faith and life, faith working through love. (cf Gal 5:6) The harmony between faith and life is damaged not only by rejection and distortion of the truths of the faith but also by a disregard for the moral obligations imposed by the Gospel.

John Paul points out that promoting and preserving the faith and moral life of the Church was the task entrusted to the Apostles. This continues in the ministry of their successors to this day. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the Church hands on to every generation everything she is and all that she believes. According to *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, this Tradition indeed comes from the Apostles and courses through the Church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The Church celebrates her great hope in the Word Incarnate in the Liturgy. By this same Tradition Christians receive “the living voice of the Gospel,” the faithful expression of God’s wisdom and will.

The *authentic interpretation* of the Lord’s law can only confirm the permanent validity of revelation and follow in the line of the interpretation given to it by the great Tradition of the Church’s teaching and life. Her saints and martyrs, her Liturgy and the instruction of the Magisterium have given witness to it as well.

John Paul concludes this chapter, teaching that it is the Church’s duty to authentically help man along his journey toward truth and freedom. He says that the Church’s right and duty to proclaim always and everywhere moral principles is summarized in a fundamental affirmation of Vatican Council II, namely that *“the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether in its written form or in that of Tradition, has been entrusted only to those charged with the Church’s living Magisterium, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”* The Church, in her life and teaching, is thus revealed as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” (1 Tim 3:15)

## **CHAPTER II “Do Not Be Conformed to This World” (Rom 12:2)**

### **The Church and the Discernment of Certain Tendencies in Present-Day Moral Theology**

The consideration of the Lord’s dialogue with the rich young man has set the stage for the Holy Father’s further development of moral activity based on Old and New Testament revelation. He summarizes its essential elements: 1) the subordination of man and his activity to God; 2) the relationship between the moral good of human acts and eternal life; 3) Christian discipleship and its grounding in perfect love; and 4) the gift of the Holy Spirit, source and means of the moral life.

Sacred Scripture remains the living and fruitful source of the Church’s moral doctrine. In this context the Church has not ceased to contemplate the mystery of the Word Incarnate in whom light is shed upon the mystery of man. The Church’s moral reflection has always been done in the light of Christ, developing a science known as moral theology. John Paul notes how this science examines Divine Revelation and at the same time responds to the demands of human reason.

The Pope reminds us that the Second Vatican Council encouraged the renewal of moral theology based ever more deeply upon Sacred Scripture. This renewed theology was to further cast light on the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ. At the same time the Council encouraged moral theologians to look for more appropriate ways of communication doctrine. John Paul sees this as important since there is a difference between the deposit or the truths of the faith and the manner in which they are expressed while keeping the same meaning and the same judgment.

Many theologians have taken up this task with enthusiasm for which the Church, and particularly the Bishops, to whom Jesus Christ primarily entrusted the ministry of teaching, is deeply appreciative. ...But there have been developed certain interpretations, says the Holy Father, that are not consistent with “sound teaching.” With due consideration he says that “some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations are (simply) incompatible with revealed truth.”

The Holy Father at this point focuses specifically on the purpose of this encyclical. He says, “It is my intention to state the principles necessary for discerning what is contrary to ‘sound doctrine,’ drawing attention to those elements of the Church’s moral teaching which today appear particularly exposed to error, ambiguity, or neglect.” He further intimates that these are the very elements that profoundly disturb the human heart. The Church, sent by Jesus Christ, once more puts forward the Master’s reply, one that possesses a light and power capable of answering even the most controversial and complex questions.

The Church’s Magisterium continues to carry out its task of discernment. Paul’s admonition addressed to Timothy is appropriate to the Bishops of today as well, “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, rebuke, and exhort, be unflinching in patience and in teaching.” ( cf 2 Tim 4:1-5)

The human issues debated today are closely related to *human freedom*. The increased awareness of human dignity demands that we be permitted on the grounds of duty and conscience to decide our actions without coercion. It is true especially where the right to religious freedom and respect for conscience is concerned. John Paul says that this heightened sense of human dignity is a positive in modern culture.

However, this perspective sometimes diverges from the truth about man as created in the image of God. In the light of faith it needs correction. Some have exalted freedom to such an extent that it has become an absolute and thus a source of its own values. The Pope says that in fact the individual conscience has been accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment. It assumes an infallible position and conscience is its source. As a result some have adopted a radically subjectivist concept of moral judgment.

Once the notion of a universal truth is lost our notion of conscience also changes. Conscience no longer is understood as the age-old reality of an act of a person’s intelligence. Instead we grant conscience the prerogative of deciding what is good and what is evil. John Paul tells us that as a result each individual can hold his own truth independent of the truth of others. Taken to the extreme this individualism leads to the denial of the very idea of human nature. This is the origin of a radical opposition between moral law and conscience; between nature and freedom.

The Holy Father notes how odd it is that this exaltation of freedom can lead to the very denial of the existence of this freedom. It is the “behavioral scientist” that quite often is the one who comes to the point of not only questioning but also even denying the reality of human freedom. Christ’s answer to the young man’s question, “Teacher, what must I

do to gain eternal life?" makes human freedom central. The Pope explicitly says that there can be no morality without freedom.

Genuine freedom as spoken of by the Second Vatican Council is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image in man. In this light we have a grave moral obligation to seek the truth, and once found, to adhere to it. Current tendencies under the influence of subjectivism and individualism are at one in lessening or even denying the dependence of freedom on truth. If we wish to critically examine these tendencies, the Holy Father says that we must do so in the light of a fundamental dependence of freedom upon truth.

## **CHAPTER II "Do Not Be Conformed to This World" (Rom 12:2)**

### **I. Freedom and Law "*Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.*" Gen 2:17**

Revelation teaches that the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man but to God alone. The Holy Father concludes that human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfillment precisely in the acceptance of God's law. Only God knows perfectly what is good for man. Some present-day thought alleges a conflict between human freedom and God's law. In this mind-set human freedom would enjoy a primacy over truth, a truth "created" by freedom. Human freedom would lay claim to moral autonomy.

This current of thought has influenced the sphere of Catholic moral teaching as well. There have been some positive directions within Catholic thought that foster a dialogue with modern culture, emphasizing the *rational*. This approach would open the way for a beneficial process that is universally understandable and communicable.

The Holy Father notes, however, that there are those who disregard the dependence of human reason upon Divine Wisdom as found in Revelation. They have in the words of the Pope, "*posited a complete sovereignty of reason in the domain of moral norms.*" In his view, such norms would constitute the boundaries of a merely human morality. In opposition to Scripture and the constant teaching of the Church, such thought leads to the denial of God as Author of the natural moral law and that man himself only participates in this law but does not establish it.

Certain moral theologians have introduced a sharp distinction between an ethical order, human in origin and of value for this world alone, and an order of salvation, significant for only certain intentions and interior attitudes toward God and neighbor. The Pope says that this has led to an actual denial that there exists in Divine Revelation a determined moral content, universally valid and permanent. The word of God would thus be reduced to mere exhortation proposed to the autonomous human reason.

This further involves the denial of a specific doctrinal competence on the part of the Church and her Magisterium with regard to particular moral norms. These norms would not be of the content of Revelation nor would they in themselves be relevant for salvation. The Holy Father draws the conclusion that the autonomy of human reason interpreted in this light is surely incompatible with Catholic teaching.

#### ***"God left man in the power of his own counsel."***

The heading of this section is a quote from Sirach. Vatican II explains that "*God left man in the power of his own counsel*" so that he might seek his Creator on his own accord and thereby arrive at full and blessed perfection by cleaving to God. These words indicate the depth of sharing in God's dominion to which man has been called, even in a certain sense over himself. The Holy Father tells us that this dominion over the world represents a great and responsible task for man. It involves his freedom in obedience to the Creator's command: "*Fill the earth and subdue*



*it.*" (Gen 1:28) In view of this, a rightful autonomy is due to every human person, as well as to the human community.

Not only the world, but also man himself has been entrusted to his own care and responsibility. God did so that man might seek his Creator and *freely* attain perfection. In exercising dominion over the world, man shapes it in accordance with his own intelligence and will. In the same way when man performs morally good acts man develops within himself his likeness to God.

Nevertheless, Vatican II warned against an autonomy that would understand created things as independent of God and that we could use them without reference to the Creator. John Paul tells us that such an autonomy eventually will lead to atheism. The Council, as well, reminded us that without its Creator, the creature simply disappears.

On the one hand, the Council recognized the role of human reason in discovering the moral law. On the other hand, it also recognized that reason draws its own truth and authority from *the eternal law*. John Paul II says that we must find a "*rightful autonomy*." "The moral law," he says, "has its origin in God and always finds its source in him." Nonetheless, by virtue of natural reason, which is derived from divine wisdom, the moral law is properly a human law as well. God first gave this light of understanding and this law to man at creation. The Pope makes it plain that *the autonomy of reason cannot mean that reason itself creates values and moral norms*. That would be the death of true freedom.

Man's genuine moral autonomy in no way means the rejection but rather the acceptance of the moral law. Human freedom and God's law meet and are called to intersect, *man's obedience and God's completely gratuitous benevolence*. When God forbade man to "eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" he was telling man that he did not possess that knowledge as something of his own. We are participants in it by the light of natural reason and of Divine Providence. The Holy Father concludes by saying that law must therefore be considered an expression of divine wisdom: that by submitting to the law, freedom submits to the truth about creation.

***"Blessed is the man who takes delight in the law of the Lord."***

Man's freedom is not negated by his obedience to the divine law. In fact through this obedience human freedom abides in the truth and conforms to human dignity. In his movement toward God, man must freely do good and avoid evil. In order to do this he must be able to distinguish between the two. The light of natural reason is nothing else but an imprint on man of the divine light. It becomes clear according to the Holy Father that natural law receives its name not because it refers to the nature of irrational beings but because the reason, which promulgates it, is proper to human nature.

Vatican II points out that the supreme rule of life is the divine law itself, eternal, objective, and universal. God has enabled man to share in this divine law. Under the gentle guidance of God's providence man increasingly recognizes unchanging truth. God's wisdom is providence, a love that cares. He cares for man differently than for non-persons. He provides not from without by means of physical laws but from within, through reason. In this way through natural knowledge of God's eternal law, man can take the right direction in the choice of his free actions. The Pope further states that in like manner God calls man to participate in his own providence through man's reasonable and responsible care. The natural law enters here as the human expression of God's eternal law. And again, this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law.

Pope Leo XIII as well emphasized the essential subordination of reason and human law to the Wisdom of God and his law. The prescription of human reason could not have the force of law unless it were the expression of some higher reason to which our spirit and our freedom need be subject. Leo concluded that the natural law is itself the eternal law, implanted in beings endowed with reason, inclining them toward right action and their end.

His reason enlightened by Divine Revelation and by faith enables man to recognize good and evil thanks to his ability to discern it. Israel was called to accept and live out God's law as a sign of its election and of the divine Covenant given on Sinai. The Church gratefully accepts and lovingly preserves this entire deposit of Revelation. In addition, the Church receives the gift of the New Law, the fulfillment of God's law in Jesus Christ, written on the human heart (2 Cor 3:3), a law of perfection and freedom (cf 2 Cor 3:17), the law of the Spirit of life in Christ (Rom 8:2).

Despite the various distinctions made by moral theologians concerning the different types of law, Pope John Paul II says that it must not be forgotten that the author of these laws is always the one and the same God. Likewise, the different ways in which God, acting in human history, cared for the world and mankind do not mutually exclude one another. In fact, they support one another. The Pope once more reiterates that God's plan poses no threat to man's freedom. On the contrary, acceptance of God's plan is the only way to affirm that freedom.

***“What the law requires is written on their hearts.” (Rom 2:15)***

Debates about *nature* and *freedom* have always marked the history of moral reflection, especially during the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Pope notes that our own day is marked by similar tensions. The penchant for a mix of empirical observations and certain forms of liberalism have led to *nature* and *freedom* being set in opposition to one another as if they were a dialectic.

At other periods, it seemed that *nature* subjected man totally to its own dynamics. Today, as well, the situation of the world of the senses within space and time seem to many people the only really decisive factors of human reality. In this context, even moral facts are frequently treated as if they were statistically verifiable data. As a result some ethicists are tempted to take as the standard for their discipline the results of statistical studies of concrete human behavior patterns and the opinions about morality encountered in the majority of people.

Other moralists, while remaining sensitive to the dignity of freedom, frequently conceive of freedom as somehow in opposition with material and biological nature. To his way of thinking, the Holy Father sees many of these approaches as overlooking the created dimension of nature and misunderstanding its integrity. When considering all these points of view, he notes how ultimately man would not even have a nature. He would be his own personal life-project. Man would be nothing more than his own freedom.

Within in this context, objections of physicalism and naturalism have been made against the traditional conception of the natural law, presenting as moral laws what are mere biological laws. Certain theologians level the charge at the Church that this is found in some documents of the Magisterium especially those dealing with sexual and conjugal ethics.

At times the Church's morally negative evaluations in these areas are deemed not to take into adequate consideration man's character as a rational and free being and the cultural conditioning of all moral norms. In this light, man not only can but actually must freely determine the meaning of his behavior. These theologians contend that God made man as a rationally free being. He left him “in the power of his own counsel” and he expects him to shape his life in a personal and rational way.

John Paul II points out that a freedom that claims to be absolute ends up treating the human body as a *raw datum*, devoid of any meaning and moral values, until freedom has shaped it in accordance with its own design. In short, this moral theory does not correspond to the truth about man and his freedom. It contradicts the Church's teachings on the unity of the human person, whose soul is *of itself* and *essentially* the form of the body. The soul is the principle of unity of the human being whereby it exists as a person.

The Pope emphasizes that it is this person that is the subject of his own moral acts. It is in the light of the dignity of the human person that reason grasps the moral value of goods towards which the person is naturally inclined.

Continuing along the path that holds to the unity of the person, the Holy Father now says that a doctrine that dissociates the moral act from the bodily dimensions of its exercise is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition. He lists the gravely immoral activity cited by St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 6:9; 19) that excludes from the Kingdom of God. The Council of Trent repeats the condemnation. In this regard the body and soul are inseparable: in the person, in the *willing* agent and in the *deliberate* act. *They stand or fall together.*

The Pope says that at this point the true meaning of the natural law can be understood to refer to man's proper and primordial nature, the nature of the human person, *the person himself in the unity of soul and body*, in the totality of his spiritual and physical characteristics. Instead of simply a set of biological norms, the natural law must be defined as the rational order in which the Creator directs man to regulate his life and his actions. It is only in reference to the human person in his unified totality; *a soul expressing itself in a body informed by an immortal spirit*, that the specifically human meaning of body could be grasped. His natural inclinations take on moral relevance only in so far as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfillment. John Paul reiterates once more that natural law thus understood does not allow for any division between freedom and nature.

***"From the beginning it was not so." (Mt 19:8)***

Because the natural law is seen to be inscribed in the rational nature of the person, the Holy Father says that this "truth," making itself felt in all beings endowed with reason throughout history, involves universality. As such, the natural law expresses the dignity of the human person and lays the foundation for his fundamental rights and duties. This universality does not ignore the absolute uniqueness of each person. Just the opposite, it embraces at its root each of the person's free acts that bear witness to the universality of the true good. Our acts thereby build up the true communion of persons. When this is ignored, culpably or not, our acts damage the communion of persons to the detriment of each.

John Paul II goes on to say that positive precepts, such as love of God and of parents, are universally binding and are unchanging. The acting individual personally assimilates the truth contained in the law. He makes it his own by his virtuous acts. The negative precepts of the natural law, however, bind in all circumstances. They oblige everyone, regardless of cost, never to offend in anyone, the personal dignity common to all, even of self.

Because the negative commandments are absolute does not mean that these moral prohibitions are more important than the positive commandments to do good. Because of circumstances man can be hindered *from doing certain good actions* but he can never be hindered from *not doing certain good actions*. Jesus also reaffirms that these prohibitions allow for no exceptions (cf. Mt 19:17-18).

Some have begun to call into question the *immutability of the natural law* and thus the very existence of *objective norms of morality*. It must be admitted that man does exist in a particular culture, but it must also be admitted that man is not exhaustively defined by that same culture. The very progress of culture demonstrates that there is

*something* about man that transcends it. That something, says the Holy Father, is human nature. Man is the measure of his culture and the condition ensuring that he does not become the prisoner of his cultures. The Pope points out that to call this immutability into question flies in the face of common experience and would render Jesus' reference to the "*beginning*" meaningless. Certainly there is a need to discover the most adequate formulation for universal and permanent moral norms in different cultural contexts, but that does not in any way form the basis for an argument against an underlying solidity.

## CHAPTER II "Do Not Be Conformed to This World" (Rom 12:2)

### II. Conscience and Truth

#### ***Man's Sanctuary***

The relationship between man's freedom and God's law is most deeply lived out in the "heart" of the person, in his moral conscience. For man has in his heart a law written by God. John Paul reminds us that to obey that law is the very dignity of man according to which he will be judged. (cf. Rom 2:14-16) The purpose of the previous discussion on freedom and law now becomes apparent. It is the way in which man conceives the relationship between freedom and law that is intimately bound up with his understanding of moral conscience.

In modern culture where freedom and law has been set in opposition to one another, freedom has been elevated to the point of idolatry. This elevation leads to a "*creative*" understanding of moral conscience. Some theologians have offered that norms are not *binding criterion* for judgments of conscience but are *general perspectives* that help man to order his life. There is in this positioning a certain "creative" approval evoked from Vatican Council II's definition of conscience as "*the sanctuary of man, where he is alone with God whose voice echoes within him.*"

The result of this "*creativity*" could legitimately become the basis for *certain exceptions to the general rule* in the face of what is in and of itself *intrinsically evil according to moral law*. The Holy Father makes it clear that from this sort of "*creativity*" arises the basis for justifying certain *pastoral solutions* to "problems." These solutions are contrary to the teaching of the Church's Magisterium and are used to form the basis for which moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept. One necessarily comes to the conclusion that these approaches pose a clear challenge to the very identity of the moral conscience in relation to human freedom and God's law.

#### ***The Judgment of Conscience***

According to St. Paul, conscience, in a certain sense, confronts man with law. It thus becomes a "*witness*" for man: a witness of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness with regard to the law. Conscience is the only witness within the person himself and known only to himself. Pope John Paul tells us that the importance of this interior dialogue can never be fully appreciated. At the same time it is a *dialog of man with God*, the author of the law.

Saint Bonaventure teaches that "conscience is like God's herald and messenger." It commands not on its own authority but as coming from God. The Holy Father offers us the understanding that conscience is the witness of God himself, whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man's soul, calling him to obedience. Moral conscience does not close up man within himself but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. It is in this, the Pope concludes, that the entire mystery and dignity of the moral conscience lies. Again, it is St. Paul that helps us to understand the nature of conscience. (cf. Rom 2:15) That it is a *moral judgment* about man and his actions, one either of acquittal or condemnation.

The judgment of conscience is a *practical judgment*, a judgment which makes known what man must do or not do, or assesses an act already performed by him. It is a judgment that applies to the concrete situation a rational conviction that one must love, and do the good and avoid the evil. This is the first principle of natural law, indeed its very foundation.

John Paul gives us to understand that whereas the natural law discloses the objective and universal demands of the moral good, conscience is the application of the law to a particular case, an inner dictate to do the good. Conscience thus formulates *moral obligation* in the light of the natural law. It formulates the proximate norm of the morality of a voluntary act, “applying the objective law to a particular case.”

It is to be noted that the judgment of conscience also has an imperative character. Man must act in accordance with it. If he fails to do this he stands condemned by his own conscience, *the proximate norm of personal morality*. Ultimately, the authority of its voice and judgments are derived from the *truth* about moral good and evil. The Pope reminds us that this truth is established by the “divine law,” the universal and objective norm of morality. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to it. *Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide for itself what is good and what is evil.*

Consequently it is in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, that the link between freedom and truth is made manifest. The Pope tells us that it is precisely for this reason that conscience expresses itself in acts of “judgment,” which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary “decisions.” The maturity and responsibility of these judgments are not measured by the liberation of conscience from objective truth, but by “an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one’s actions.”

## **CHAPTER II “Do Not Be Conformed to This World” (Rom 12:2)**

### **III. Fundamental Choice and Specific Kinds of Behavior**

The Holy Father allows that freedom is not only the choice for a particular action but also, within that choice, a decision about oneself; a setting of one’s own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, ultimately for or against God. However, some have proposed more radical revisions of this relationship between person and acts, a *fundamental option*.

According to this line of thought, the key role in the moral life is to be attributed to a *fundamental option* whereby the person makes an overall self-determination in a “transcendental” and “athematic” way not by a specific, conscious, and reflective decision. Specific acts that would flow from this *option* would constitute only partial and never definitive attempts to give it expression. The immediate consequences of such acts would not be absolute in regard to the Good but merely partial and particular. None of these acts, which by their nature are partial, could determine the freedom of man as a person in his totality. A distinction thus comes to be introduced between the *fundamental option* and *deliberate choices of a concrete kind*. The Pope concludes that this sort of thought will eventually lead to reserving the moral assessment of the person to his fundamental option, prescinding in whole or in part from his choices of particular, concrete, human behavior.

John Paul admits that Christian, moral teaching, Biblical in its roots, acknowledges the importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is an obedience of faith by which one makes a total self-commitment to God. This faith, which works through love, comes from the core of man, from his heart. This radical decision to follow Jesus is admirably expressed in his own words:

“Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.” (Mk 8:35) Jesus’ call to follow him marks the greatest possible exaltation of human freedom, and yet at the same time it witnesses to the truth and to the obligation of acts of faith and of decisions described as involving a fundamental option.

St. Paul encourages us to be watchful, because freedom is always threatened by slavery. (cf Gal 5:1) This is the case when an act of faith – in the sense of a fundamental option - becomes separated from the choice of particular acts. The Pope argues that this new tendency is therefore contrary to the teaching of Scripture itself. For Scripture sees the fundamental option as a genuine choice of freedom that is linked profoundly to particular acts. Here it must be said that the so-called fundamental option is always brought into play through conscious and free decisions. For this reason, it is revoked when one engages his freedom in conscious decisions to the contrary, with regard to morally grave matter.

The Holy Father says that to separate the fundamental option from concrete kinds of behavior means to contradict the personal unity of the moral agent in his body and soul. According to the logic of the *fundamental option* as previously discussed, one could remain faithful to God independently of whether certain acts were deliberately and gravely contrary to God’s commandments. Yet with each mortal sin the individual offends God as the giver of the law and thus becomes guilty with regard to the entire law. (cf James 2:8-11) Even if he perseveres in faith, he loses sanctifying grace, charity and eternal happiness. The Council of Trent long ago taught that the grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith is lost, but also by any other mortal sin.”

## **CHAPTER II “Do Not Be Conformed to This World” (Rom 12:2)**

### **IV. The Moral Act**

#### ***Teleology and Teleologism***

The Holy Father begins this section by setting some groundwork. He says that the relationship between man’s freedom and God’s law, centered in the moral conscience, is realized in human acts. Human acts are moral because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers of the early Church, spoke of how human life is always subject to change needing to be born ever anew. This birth does not happen through foreign intervention but occurs as the result of man’s free choices. Thus he concludes that in a sense we are our own parents creating ourselves, as we will, by our decisions.

The Pope continues by telling us that the morality of acts is defined by the relationship of man’s freedom with the authentic good, the eternal law. When known by man’s natural reason this eternal law becomes the natural law. When known through God’s supernatural Revelation it is called divine law. Actions are morally good when choices of freedom are made *in conformity with man’s true good*. It is then that they express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end, *God himself*. The performance of good acts, commanded by the *One who alone is good*, constitutes the indispensable condition of and path to eternal blessedness. “If you wish to enter eternal life, keep the commandments.” (Mt 19:17) Jesus makes it clear that only actions that are in conformity with the good can be a path that leads to life.

The rational ordering of human actions in their truth and in the voluntary pursuit of the good, known by reason, constitutes morality. John Paul concludes here that human activity cannot be judged as morally good merely because it is a means for attaining one or another of its goals, or simply because the individual's intention is good. Though the moral life has an essential "teleological character" (oriented toward an end) it nevertheless consists in the deliberate ordering of human acts to God, the supreme good and last end (telos) of man. This ordering to one's ultimate end is not something subjective; that is, dependent solely upon one's intention. It must be in conformity with the authentic moral good of man, safeguarded by the commandments.

Clearly such an ordering must be rational and free, conscious and deliberate, by virtue of which man is "responsible" for his actions and subject to the judgment of God. But on what does this moral assessment of man's free acts depend? What is it that ensures this ordering of human acts to God? With these questions the Holy Father introduces us to some new or newly revived theological trends that he says call for careful discernment.

The Holy Father begins now a consideration of certain ethical theories called "teleological." They claim concern for the conformity of human acts with the ends pursued by the agent (the acting person) and the values intended. In general, right conduct would be the one capable of "maximizing" the good and "minimizing" the evil. Attempting to use rational arguments in their approach they seek to be able to dialogue with non-Catholics and non-believers in a pluralistic society.

These approaches are infected in one way or another with false notions linked to an inadequate understanding of the object of moral action. This "teleologism" as a method is known as "consequentialism" or "proportionalism." The former claims to draw the criteria of the rightness of a given way of acting solely from a calculation of the foreseen consequences of a given choice. The latter focuses rather on the proportion acknowledged between the good and bad effects of a choice with a view to the "greater good" or the "lesser evil."

The teleological ethical theories of proportionalism and consequentialism maintain ultimately that it is never possible to formulate an absolute prohibition of particular kinds of behavior that would be in conflict in every circumstance and in every culture with established and recognized moral values. The Pope notes how in a world where goodness is always mixed with evil, and every good effect linked to other evil effects, ultimately concrete kinds of behavior could be described as "right" or "wrong" without it being thereby possible to judge as morally "good" or "bad" the will of the person choosing them. Even when considering grave matter, particular moral precepts should be considered as operative norms that are always relative and open to exceptions. As a result, deliberate consent to certain kinds of behavior declared illicit by traditional moral theology would not necessarily imply an objective moral evil.

### ***The Object of the Deliberate Act***

Although these theories would seem to offer some kind of benefit, John Paul II makes the point that they are not faithful to the Church's teaching. These theories cannot claim to be grounded in the Catholic moral tradition. When the Apostle Paul sums up the fulfillment of the law in the precept of love of neighbor as oneself (Rom 13:8-10) he is not weakening the commandments but reinforcing them. Love of God and of one's neighbor cannot be separated from the observance of the commandments of the Covenant. The Pope says that it is an honored characteristic of Christians to obey God rather than men and to accept even martyrdom as a consequence like the holy men and women of the Old and New Testament who gave their lives rather than act contrary to faith or virtue.

This entire encyclical, and especially certain sections of it,

is not necessarily light reading. It is equally a challenge to condense the thought of Pope John Paul II. However, right moral living requires more than an opinion, albeit significant numbers may hold that opinion. A good example of this is abortion. Even when choices are difficult, moral principles must always guide all of Catholic moral action. With this in mind, we now continue to follow the thought of the Pope.

As important as consequences and intentions can be, they of themselves are not sufficient for judging the moral quality of a concrete choice of action. Foreseeable consequences, while capable of lessening the gravity of an evil act, cannot alter its morality. Everyone recognizes the impossibility of evaluating all the good and evil consequences of one's own acts. The Holy Father now asks a rhetorical question: "How could an absolute obligation be justified on the basis of such debatable calculations?" Of course the answer is that it cannot.

The Pope offers an answer rooted in the analysis supplied us by St. Thomas Aquinas. The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the "*object*" rationally chosen by the deliberate will. The *object* of the act of willing is in fact a *freely chosen kind of behavior*. That *object* is the immediate end of a deliberate decision that qualifies the person's act of the will. As a result, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, there are certain specific behaviors that are always wrong to choose, because choosing them involves a disorder of the will, a *moral evil*. John Paul shares the example of someone "robbing to feed the poor." Even though the intention is good, the uprightness of the will is still lacking. No evil done with even a good intention can be excused. (Cf. Rom 3:8)

A good intention alone is not sufficient. It must be accompanied with a correct choice of action. The human act depends on its *object*. Is that *object* (i.e. robbing) *capable or not of being ordered* to God, to the One who "alone is good," and so to bring about the perfection of the person. Christian ethics pays particular attention to the moral object. Yet it does not refuse to consider the inner goal-directedness of acting inasmuch as it is directed to promoting the true good of the person. However, Christian ethics also recognizes that the true good is really pursued only when the essential elements of human nature are respected. As St. Alphonsus Liguori, the patron of moral theologians and confessors, teaches: "It is not enough to do good works; they need to be done well. ...They must be done for the sole purpose of pleasing God."

***"Intrinsic Evil": It is not licit to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom 3:8)***

In summation of this particular chapter the Holy Father restates what he has already discussed. One must therefore reject the theses characteristic of teleological and proportionalist theories, namely, that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil an act simply according to its object. Pope John Paul confirms once more that the decisive element for moral judgment is the object of the human act, which establishes whether it is capable of being ordered to the good and ultimate end that is God. This capability is grasped by reason in the very being of man.

Reason attests that there are objects of the human act that are of their very nature incapable of being ordered to God because they contradict the good of the person made in his image. These acts are called *intrinsically evil*. They are *always* and *of themselves (per se)* evil. Without denying the influence of circumstances and intentions on morality, the Church teaches that "there exist acts that of themselves (*per se*) and in themselves, independently of circumstances are always seriously wrong by reason of their object.

The Second Vatican Council listed as numerous such acts when discussing the dignity of the human person: among them, whatever is hostile to life, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, and whatever is offensive to human dignity. All such acts are intrinsically evil because ultimately they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator. Pope Paul VI teaching as well in *Humanae Vitae* concerning contraceptive practices said that it is



never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it. (cf. Rom 3:8) In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture.

Of acts that are of themselves (intrinsically) evil, the Holy Father reiterates what he has said before. A good intention or a particular circumstance can diminish the evil but cannot remove it. The acts remain “irremediably” evil acts; *per se* (of themselves) and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person. Again the Pope reemphasizes, “Circumstances or intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act *subjectively* good or defensible as a choice.”

The doctrine of the *object* as a source of morality represents an authentic expression of the Biblical morality of the Covenant and of the commandments, of charity and of the virtues. Without the rational determination of the morality of human acting as previously stated, it would be impossible to affirm the existence of an *objective moral order* and to establish any particular norm binding under any and all conditions. By acknowledging and teaching the existence of intrinsic evil in given human acts, the Church remains faithful to the integral truth about man. In this way she respects and promotes man in his dignity and vocation. In the ultimate analysis we ourselves are faced with *the question of man himself, of his truth, and of the moral consequences* flowing from that *truth*.

### **CHAPTER III “Lest the Cross of Christ Be Emptied of Its Power” (1 Cor 1:17)**

#### **Moral Good for the Life of the Church and of the World**

##### **“For freedom Christ has set us free.” (1Gal 5:1)**

The fundamental question posed by the theories mentioned previously is *the relationship of man's freedom to God's law*. Ultimately, it is a *question of the relationship between freedom and truth*. Pope John Paul reminds us that only the freedom, which submits to the Truth, leads us to our true good. Present-day culture has lost sight of the essential bond between Truth and the Good and Freedom.

The Holy Father points out what is quite evident from observation. Man no longer knows *who he is, from where he comes and where he is going*. Hence we see a destructive mentality all around us. Everywhere we encounter contempt for human life after conception and before birth. Indeed, something even more serious has happened. Man is no longer convinced that only in the truth can he find salvation. Freedom uprooted from objectivity becomes relativism in the field of theology. Man no longer trusts in the wisdom of God to guide him by means of the moral law.

The Church's task is not solely one of condemning these false theories. More importantly in a positive way, the Church seeks to help all the faithful to form a moral conscience that will make judgments and will lead to decisions in accordance with the truth. In this regard the secret of the Church's power to educate rests in *constantly looking to the Lord Jesus*. The true and final answer to the problem of morality lies in him alone. It is in the Crucified Christ that the Church finds the answer to the questions troubling so many people today. St. Paul reminds us: “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block... Christ the power of God, the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor 1:17; 23-24) It is the Crucified Christ who reveals the authentic meaning of freedom. He lives it fully in the total gift of himself and calls his disciples to share in his freedom.

The Pope tells us that rational reflection and daily experience reveal to us that man's freedom is real but limited; that its absolute and unconditional origin is not to be found within itself. Human freedom belongs to us as human creatures but it is a freedom that has been given as a gift. It must be cultivated responsibly. Indeed, freedom is an

essential part of what forms the basis for the dignity of the person. We must fully come to appreciate that it is rooted in the truth about man, and that freedom is ultimately directed towards communion.

Reason and experience not only confirm the weakness of human freedom but they also verify its tragic aspects. In his errors and negative decisions, man gets a glimpse of the source of a deep rebellion. It leads him to reject the Truth and the Good while he sets himself up as the absolute principle of authority unto himself. "You will be like God." (cf Gen 3:5) Consequently, it is freedom itself that needs to be set free; set free in Christ.

Christ reveals that the frank and open acceptance of truth is the condition for authentic freedom. As Jesus before Pilate, this is truth that sets one free in the face of worldly power and gives one the strength to endure *martyrdom*. Pope John Paul tells us that worship of God and a relationship with truth are revealed in Christ as the deepest foundation of freedom. Further, Jesus shows us by his life, and not just by his words, that freedom is acquired in love; that is, the gift of self.

It is instructive how through communion with her Crucified and Risen Lord, the Church learns to live in freedom and to give of herself and to serve. The Church and each of her members is called to share in the *kingly office* of Jesus Christ who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt 20:28) Jesus, then, is the living and personal summation of perfect freedom in total obedience to the will of God. His crucified flesh fully revealed the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth.

#### ***Walking in the light (cf. 1 Jn 1:7)***

Now the Holy Father tells us that the attempt to set freedom in opposition to truth, to separate them radically, is the consequence of another more seriously destructive dichotomy, one that separates faith from morality. It describes a secularized society wherein many people today think and live "as if God did not exist." Even Christians are affected by this mentality. In a much dechristianized culture, believers employ this sort of criteria in making judgments and decision that often times are contrary to the Gospel.

The Pope encourages us as Christians to discover the newness of faith and its power to judge a prevalent and all intrusive culture. It means rediscovering once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not merely a set of propositions to be accepted but a lived knowledge of Christ, a truth to be lived out. It is an encounter, a communion of love and life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. (Jn 14:6) It means an act of trusting abandonment to Christ.

Faith, nevertheless, does possess a moral content. "...By this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. ...He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." (cf. 1 Jn 2:3f) Through the moral life, faith becomes "*confession*," not only before God but also before men when it then becomes *witness*. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works." (cf Mt 5:14f)

John Paul points out that these works are above all those of charity and authentic freedom manifested and lived out in the gift of self, even like Jesus on the Cross, to the total gift of self. Christ's witness is the source, model, and means for the witness of his disciples who are called to walk the same road. Ultimately the conclusion is that charity, in conformity with the radical demands of the Gospel, can lead the believer to the supreme witness of *martyrdom*. Once again it means imitating Jesus even to the Cross.

### ***Martyrdom, the exaltation of the inviolable holiness of God's law***

The universality and unchangeableness of moral norms manifest and simultaneously protect the personal dignity and inviolability of man, made in God's image. As has been discussed previously, the unacceptability of *teleological*, *consequentialist* and *proportionalist* ethical theories is confirmed in an eloquent way by Christian martyrdom, still present in today's Church.

The Holy Father recalls some history for us. Martyrdom was already present in the Old Testament. Note the story of Susanna. (cf Dan 13:1ff) It bears witness not only to her faith and trust in God but also to her obedience to the truth and the absoluteness of the moral order. Susanna chose to die rather than offend the Lord, a perfectly clear witness without any compromise.

At the dawn of the New Testament, the one who came to bear witness to the light, the one to whom it was granted to baptize the Redeemer of the world, John the Baptist, was himself baptized in his own blood. The New Testament begins with examples of the followers of Christ, Stephen, the deacon, James, the Apostle, and others who gave their lives confessing their faith in Christ.

Martyrdom is witness that knows no compromise. The Church proposes example after example of Saints who bore witness to moral truth with their lives. They preferred death to a single mortal sin. John Paul tells us that martyrdom bears splendid witness to the holiness of God's law and the inviolability of the dignity of man. "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life." (Mk 8:36)

The Pope explains that martyrdom rejects as false whatever "human meaning" one might attribute, even in exceptional conditions, to an act morally evil in itself. In its essence the moral evil is a violation of man's humanity. Hence, martyrdom is the exaltation of a person's perfect humanity and of true life. In the infant Church, Saint Ignatius of Antioch attested to this addressing the Christians at the threshold of his own martyrdom in Rome.

Finally, martyrdom is an outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church. Fidelity to God's holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *even to the point of the shedding of blood*. The Holy Father says that this witness makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to warding off the head long plunge into the most dangerous crisis that can afflict man: *the confusion between good and evil*. By witnessing fully to the good, these individuals are a living reproof to those who transgress the law.

Although most will not be called to this supreme testimony, the Pope reminds us that there is nonetheless a consistent witness that all Christians must daily be ready to make. It must be done many times at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice. We all can learn of what Pope Gregory the Great taught: that one can actually "love the difficulties of this world for the sake of eternal reward."

### ***Universal and unchanging moral norms at the service of the person and society.***

John Paul begins by reflecting upon the portrait given the Church by the world. The Church is said to be intransigent, lacking in understanding and compassion. Yet, in fact, she is the ever-faithful Bride of Christ, who is the Truth in person. As Teacher, she never tires of proclaiming that truth of which she is neither author nor arbiter.

Genuine understanding and compassion means love for the person, for his true good and authentic freedom. This does not result from concealing the truth but from proposing it in all its strength as coming from God's eternal Wisdom. The Church can never renounce *the principle of truth and consistency whereby she does not agree to call*

*good evil and evil good.* Yet, she follows the lead of her Savior in compassion and forbearance. Christ having come to save the world was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy toward sinners.

The Holy Father tells us again and again that the Church's firmness in defending universal and unchanging moral norms is at the service of man's true freedom. There can be no freedom apart from or in opposition to the truth.

This service is directed to *every man* in his singularity and uniqueness. Only by obedience to universal moral norms does *this man* find full confirmation of his personal uniqueness and potential for moral growth. However, this service is directed to *all mankind* as well. These norms form the unshakable foundation of a just and peaceful human coexistence, the basis of equality for all its members, possessing common rights and duties. *When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone.* "Before the demands of morality," says the Pope, "we are all absolutely equal."

Moral norms, by protecting the inviolable personal dignity of every human being, help to preserve the human social fabric and its proper and fruitful development. The purpose for all social institutions is the human person. Therefore the commandments, though formulated in general terms, can be applied specifically. These norms entail specific demands to which both *public authorities* and *citizens* alike must pay heed. Neither civil authorities nor particular individuals ever have the authority to violate the fundamental rights of the human person. Only a morality that recognizes universal moral norms, without exceptions for anyone, can guarantee the ethical foundation of a just society.

#### ***Morality and the renewal of social and political life***

The Holy Father turns his attention to the renewal of modern society. He notes how there is a growing indignation by many people whose human rights have been trampled upon and held in contempt. There is at the same time a sense of need for a radical personal and social renewal. The Pope recognizes that the causes of many of these situations are based in culture. Certainly, there is a long and difficult road ahead.

Pope John Paul says that at the heart of the issue of culture we find the moral sense, which is in turn rooted and fulfilled in the religious sense. Only God constitutes the unshakable foundation and essential condition of morality, and thus of the commandments. The Supreme Good and moral good meet in truth: *the truth of God, the Creator and Redeemer, and the truth of man, created and redeemed by him.* Only upon this truth is it possible to construct a renewed society and solve the complex problems affecting it.

Totalitarianism arises out of a denial of truth in the objective sense. If there is no transcendent truth, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people. John Paul points out how if one does not acknowledge transcendent truth then the force of power takes over. Each person tends to make full use of the means available to impose his own interest or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others.

The inseparable connection between truth and freedom is extremely significant for the life of persons in the socio-economic and socio-political sphere. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that in economic matters, respect for human dignity requires the practice of the virtue of temperance, a sense of moderation. The Catechism goes on to present a series of kinds of behavior and actions contrary to human dignity: theft, deliberate retention of goods lent or objects lost, business fraud, unjust wages and many, many more such like injustices. Additionally the Holy Father reminds us that reducing persons by violence to *use-value* or a *source of profit* is a sin against their dignity as persons and their fundamental rights.

In the realm of the political, it must be noted that truthfulness in the relations between those governing and those governed is primarily rooted in the transcendent value of the person and the objective moral demands of the functioning State. If there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can be easily manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism. In every sphere, morality that is founded on truth and open to authentic freedom renders an indispensable and valuable service. It does this for individual persons in their growth and development as well as for society and its concomitant development.

### ***Grace and Obedience to God's Law***

Even in the most difficult situations man must respect the norms of morality. John Paul knows that maintaining a harmony between freedom and truth sometimes demands uncommon sacrifice. It can even involve martyrdom. That age old temptation is still present: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:5) It is echoed in all the other temptations to which man is so easily inclined as a result of the original fall.

Temptation can be overcome and sins can be avoided. Keeping God's law in particular situations can be difficult but it is never impossible. God does not command the impossible. The Pope tells us that in commanding God admonishes us "*to do what you can and to pray for what you cannot.*" Man always has before him the spiritual horizon of hope, thanks to the help of divine grace with the cooperation of human freedom.

It would be a very serious error to conclude that the Church's teaching is essentially only an *ideal*, in some way to be adapted or proportioned to the concrete possibilities of man. Christ has redeemed man dominated by lust. This means that he has been given the possibility of realizing the entire truth of his being. The Holy Father says that Christ has set our freedom free, free from the domination of concupiscence. If man sins, it is not for reason of the imperfection of God's grace but his own neglect of use of the grace available to him.

Appropriate allowance is made both for God's mercy towards sinful man who experiences conversion and for the understanding of human weakness. John Paul reminds us that such understanding never means compromising the standard of good and evil in order to adapt it to particular circumstances. It is unacceptable to make our own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good so that we can feel self-justified without recourse to God and his mercy. Such an attitude corrupts the morality of society because it encourages doubt about the objectivity of the moral law and even rejects specific, absolute moral prohibitions.

As an example, the Pope now looks at the message of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. (cf. Lk 18:13) The tax collector's prayer does not dwell on self-justification but on his own unworthiness before God. "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*" The Pharisee, on the other hand, is self-justified, finding some excuse for each of his failings.

Here we encounter two different attitudes. The tax collector represents a repentant conscience, fully aware of his human fragility. The Pharisee represents a self-satisfied conscience, not thinking himself needful of God's mercy. Today, this latter attitude is expressed particularly in the attempt to adapt moral norms to one's own capacities and interests, even to the rejection of the very idea of a moral norm. The former attitude represents that of St. Paul, "Who will deliver me from this body of death? ...Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom 7:24-25)

### ***Morality and the New Evangelization***

The Holy Father begins this section by recalling that evangelization is the Church's most powerful and stirring challenge that she has had to face from the beginning. It comes from the very mandate of Christ himself, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole of creation." (Mk 16:15)

The present time is marked by a formidable challenge to evangelization. The dechristianization of a once Christian heart is at its center. It involves the loss of faith, or at a minimum, it's becoming irrelevant in our everyday life. Far more disastrous is the accompanying decline, or obscuring, of the moral sense. There is a widespread tendency toward subjectivism, utilitarianism and relativism as pragmatic approaches to the difficult issues of life. Even more treacherous is that these "isms" assume a full cultural and social legitimacy.

The "new evangelization" of today requires the proclamation and presentation of morality as well. Jesus himself called the people to faith *and conversion*. (cf Mk 1:15) Peter's message subsequent to Pentecost was the same. (cf Acts 2:37ff)

John Paul says that the new evangelization will show its authenticity and release its missionary force when it is not only carried out through the *word proclaimed* but also the *word lived*. The life of holiness lived by the People of God is the simplest and most attractive way to demonstrate the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to the demands of God's law. He goes on to further tell us that the Church, as a wise teacher, has always held up the saints, among whom the Blessed Virgin has held the most prominent place, as models of life lived in accordance with God's commandments and the Beatitudes of the Gospel.

In Baptism the Christian has been given the charge to live the life of Christ as priest, prophet and king. Lived in this fashion, his moral life has the value of "spiritual worship." The Christian life continues to be nourished in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

At the heart of this new evangelization and of the new moral life is the *Spirit of Christ*, the source and strength of Holy Mother Church. Pope Paul VI reminded us that evangelization would never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who confirmed the hearts and minds of the disciples. Strengthened by this gift in the Lord, they feared neither prison nor chains.

In the living context of this new evangelization, aimed at regenerating the faith and done in deep relationship to the Holy Spirit, we can now begin to understand the proper place that continuing theological reflection about the moral life holds within the Church's community of believers. The Pope closes by saying that we can now speak of the mission and the responsibility proper to moral theologians. This he will do in the next installment.

### ***The Service of Moral Theologians***

John Paul recalls how the whole Church is called to evangelize and to witness by a life of faith. It is so because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the universal body of the faithful cannot be mistaken in belief when "from the Bishops to the last of the lay faithful," it expresses the consensus of all in matters of faith and morals. This expresses the mind of Vatican Council II.

The "vocation" of the theologian in the Church is specifically at the service of the "believing effort to understand the faith." The theologian is to pursue an ever-deeper understanding of the word of God in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church. The Holy Father follows this with an important statement, "He (the theologian) does this in communion with the *Magisterium* (the college of Bishops in union with the Pope) which

has been charged with the responsibility of preserving *the deposit of faith*. Revealed truth surely surpasses all telling. Thus the theological science in seeking to understand the faith more deeply aids the People of God *to give an account of their hope to those who ask*. (cf. 1 Pet 3:15)

In order to define the identity of theology and for it to carry out its mission, theology must recognize its profound and vital connection with the Church, her mystery, her life and mission. Theology is at the service of the Church. Authentic theology can flourish only through a committed and responsible participation in and by belonging to the Church as a “community of faith.” It does not exist in isolation.

What is said of theology in general can also be said of moral theology in particular. The Church’s Magisterium, for her part, intervenes not only in the sphere of faith but also in the sphere of morals. It has the task for discerning and making normative judgments for the consciences of believers. The Magisterium often times teaches the faithful specific particular precepts and requires that they consider them in conscience as morally binding.

Moral theologians, who by mandate of their Pastors teach in seminaries, have a grave obligation to instruct future priests and religious well so that they are aware of commandments and norms declared by the Church. Moral theologians, employed by the Magisterium, must develop a deeper understanding for its teachings and to expound on the validity and obligatory nature of the precepts it proposes. Finally, in the exercise of their ministry, the Pope reminds moral theologians that they are to give the example of a loyal assent, both internal and external, to both dogma and morality.

The service that moral theologians are called to provide is of the utmost importance. Through its scientific reflection, moral theology acquires an inner spiritual dimension in response to the need to develop fully the *imago Dei* (image of God) present in every human person.

John Paul II recognizes that moral theology is encountering particularly difficult times today. Because the Church’s morality involves a normative dimension, moral theology cannot be reduced merely to a body of knowledge such as in the so-called behavioral sciences. The behavioral science are concerned with the phenomenon of morality only from within an historical or social context. The relevance of the behavioral sciences must always be measured against the primordial question: *What is good or evil? What must be done to have eternal life?*

From the theological point of view, moral principles are not dependent upon a particular, historical moment. The Pope notes how the affirmation of moral principles is not within the competence of formal empirical methods. Moral theology, faithful to the supernatural sense of faith, must take into account the spiritual dimension of the human heart and its vocation to divine love.

While the behavioral sciences develop an empirical and statistical concept of “normality,” faith teaches that this “normalcy” itself bears the traces of a fall from man’s original justice. In other words, original sin is a part of the equation. It is the Gospel that reveals the full truth about man and his moral journey. It proclaims God’s mercy that preserves from despair on the one hand and from the presumption of salvation without merit on the other. God also reminds sinners of the joy of forgiveness that sees the moral law as a liberating truth, a grace filled source of hope, a path to life.

Moral theologians, charged with teaching the Church’s doctrine, have a grave duty to train the faithful to make moral discernments, to be committed to the true good and to have confident recourse to God’s grace. Borrowing from ideas fostered in a representative democracy, moral teaching cannot depend simply upon a respect for a

process. *Dissent*, in the form of carefully orchestrated protests carried on in the media, is *opposed to ecclesial communion* and to a correct understanding of the hierarchical constitution of the People of God. The Holy Father rightly says that opposition to the teaching of the Church's Pastors cannot be seen as a legitimate expression, either of Christian freedom or of the diversity of the Spirit's gifts.

The Church's Pastors, according to their apostolic mission, have the duty to insist on *the right of the faithful* to receive Catholic doctrine in its purity and integrity. The theologian can never forget that he too is a member of the People of God, that he must be respectful of it while offering it a teaching that in no way does harm to the doctrine of the faith.

### ***Our own responsibilities as Pastors***

The Pastors (the Bishops of the Church) become the focus of attention as the Pope begins to draw this encyclical to a close. Pre-eminent among the responsibilities of the Bishops is the preaching of the Gospel. Endowed with the authority of Christ himself, the Bishops are authentic teachers. They must be vigilant in warding off the errors that threaten their flock. Just as the Lord did with the rich, young man in the Gospel, the Bishops of the Church must teach the faithful the things that lead them to God. They must remind the faithful of the moral commandments already revealed in the Old Testament and as Jesus did, they are also to indicate their spirit and deepest meaning.

The Holy Father explains how Jesus has entrusted to Pastors the "answer" to the question about morality in particular ways; as the object of their preaching in fulfillment of their *prophetic office*; as a part of their *priestly office* when they dispense the gifts of grace and sanctification to the faithful; and finally and especially as they exercise their vigilance over moral teachings in carrying out their *governing office*. John Paul II speaks clearly to the Bishops when he says, "Each of us knows how important is the teaching which represents the theme of this encyclical and which is today being restated with the authority of the Successor of Peter." (The emphasis is mine.) This reaffirmation of the *universality and immutability of the moral commandments*, especially those prohibiting always and without exception *intrinsically evil acts* is critical.

Once again the Holy Father reminds the Bishops of the duty they have of being vigilant that the word of God be faithfully taught. In carrying out this task he acknowledges the assistance of theologians. However, he goes on to say that theological opinions never constitute the rule or the norm of episcopal teaching. Its authority is derived, by the assistance of the Holy Spirit and in communion *cum Petro et sub Petro* (with Peter and under Peter), from fidelity to the Catholic faith that comes from the Apostles. Insistently the Pope reiterates that it is the "grave obligation" of each Pastor that the "sound doctrine" of faith and morals be taught in his diocese.

John Paul makes it clear that the Bishops have a special responsibility with regard to Catholic institutions. It falls to them, in communion with the Holy See, both to grant the title "Catholic" to Church-related schools, universities, health-care facilities and counseling services, and, in the case of a serious failure to live up to that title, to take it away.

It is reasonable to expect that, when people ask the Church questions raised by their consciences, when the faithful in the Church turn to their bishops and pastors, the Church's reply contains the voice of Jesus Christ, the voice of the truth about good and evil. The Pope concludes this section by saying that it is through the anointing of the Spirit that this gentle but challenging word becomes light and life for man.

**Conclusion:** *Mary, Mother of Mercy*



As the Holy Father does so many times, at the end of his letters he calls us to entrust ourselves to Mary, in this case he says, "*Mother of God and Mother of Mercy.*" Mary is Mother of Mercy because her Son, Jesus Christ, was sent by the Father as the revelation of God's mercy.

No human sin can erase the mercy of God, or prevent him from unleashing all his triumphant power, if we only call upon him. *The Exultet* of the Easter Vigil sings of how the Father, "*in order to ransom a slave, sacrificed his Son.*" The gift of the Spirit renews the face of the earth (Ps 104:30). Through this new life, Jesus makes us sharers in his love and leads us to the Father in the Spirit.

According to the Pope, there is *an extraordinary simplicity* here. At times some of the new and complex moral problems seem overwhelming and almost impossible to understand. John Paul says that this is not true because Christian morality consists in the simplicity of the Gospel, *in following Jesus Christ*, in abandoning oneself to him, in letting oneself be transformed by his grace and renewed by his mercy, gifts that come to us through living in the communion of his Church. Further, he says that by the light of the Holy Spirit, the living essence of Christian morality can be understood by everyone, even the least learned, but particularly by those who are able to preserve an *undivided heart*. It is the task of the Church's Magisterium to see that following Christ develops without falsification or obscuring its moral demands.

Mary is also Mother of Mercy because at the foot of the Cross Jesus entrusted to her, in the person of John, his Church and all humanity. Mary became Mother of each of us, the Mother who obtains divine mercy for all.

Mary is the radiant sign and inviting model of the moral life says the Holy Father. Mary lived and exercised her freedom precisely by giving herself to God and accepting God's gift within herself. By the gift of herself, Mary entered fully into the plan of God. By accepting and pondering in her heart events that she did not always understand (cf. Lk 2:19), she became the model of all those who hear the word of God and keep it. Mary addresses us as well with the command she gave to the servants at Cana in Galilee at the marriage feast: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).

Mary shares our human condition, but in complete openness to the grace of God for she never knew sin. Yet, she understands sinful man and loves him with a Mother's love. For this reason the Pope says that Mary is on the side of truth and shares the Church's burden in recalling always and to everyone the demands of morality. She never permits sinful man to be deceived by those who claim to love him by justifying his sin. That would empty her Son's sacrifice of its power.

"No absolution," says John Paul, "offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life." It occurs to me that this means that *absolution comes only in the confessional!*