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Christopher J. Walsh
Sacred Heart University

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Cover Page Footnote
Rev. Christopher J. Walsh is editor of the Fairfield County Catholic and Adjunct Instructor of Religious Studies at Sacred Heart University.

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One of the most striking and consistent features of the renewal of Catholic theology in this century has been its focus upon the person of Jesus Christ. This sharpened focus achieved its culmination and confirmation in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The first two words of the foundational Vatican II document on the Church Lumen Gentium, for instance, do not refer, as some suppose, to the Church, but rather to Christ: “Lumen gentium cum sit Christus,” “Since Christ is the light of the world.”

Pope John Paul II, who participated actively in the deliberations of Vatican II as the young Archbishop of Krakow, has continued this emphasis upon the person of Christ in his own ordinary magisterium. From his inaugural encyclical entitled Redemptor Hominis (“The Redeemer of Humankind”) to the first words that he spoke last August in Mile High Stadium to the 200,000 young people gathered for World Youth Day (“I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, he is the Way, the Truth and the Life!”), one outstanding characteristic of the writings and addresses of this pope is their profoundly Christological focus.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the theme which John Paul has been repeating with increasing urgency over the last ten years: the need for a “new evangelization,” including a “re-evangelization” of traditionally Christian regions that have become “dechristianized,” and an evangelization of modern culture to make it a “civilization of love.” Since 1987 the Pope has been linking this call for the new evangelization, as he did in Denver, to the approaching celebration of the 2,000th anniversary of the Incarnation of Christ at the beginning of the third millennium. In a 1991 lecture at Fordham University on “John Paul II and the New Evangelization,” Father Avery Dulles commented: “the evangelical...
turn in the ecclesial vision of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II is one of the most surprising and important developments in the Catholic Church since Vatican II."

It is in this context that I wish to offer a couple of observations about the Pope's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* from the perspective, not of moral theology, but of systematic theology. When one reads the document in this light, the thing that immediately strikes one is precisely this new Christological and evangelical emphasis, which is especially evident in the introduction, chapter one and chapter three. It is all the more surprising since Catholic theology has traditionally tended to discuss issues of morality in the philosophical and rational terms of the universal moral law, with scant references to Christ and Scripture. Let me point out a few places in the encyclical where this new emphasis is seen.

From the beginning of *Veritatis Splendor*, the Pope signals his intention to discuss morality from a Christological viewpoint. He writes:

> [T]he decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself, as the Second Vatican Council recalls: "In fact, *it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man.*" (§2)

The passage which the Pope cites here from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, §22, is, incidentally, one of the central texts for John Paul's anthropology, one to which he returns time and again in his writings.

Chapter One of *Veritatis Splendor*, which is subtitled "'Christ and the answer to the question about morality,'" is a scriptural meditation on the encounter in the Gospel of Matthew between Jesus and the rich young man who is seeking what he must do to have eternal life. Here the Pope writes: "'People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil.'" Then he quotes from his 1979 encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*:
Consequently, "the man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly . . . [must] draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter him with all his own self; he must ‘appropriate’ and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself." (§8)

John Paul notes that Jesus’ final words to the young man — "Come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21) — effectively sum up all Christian moral teaching:

*Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.* . . . This is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves *holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father. (§19)

In Chapter Three of the encyclical, which takes as its scriptural motif Paul’s line ‘*lest the Cross of Christ be emptied of its power*’ (1 Corinthians 1:17), the Pope makes a somewhat eclectic survey of the practical applications of Christian morality in the areas of spirituality, ecclesiology and political theology, and includes a meditation on the meaning of Christian martyrdom. Here too the focus on the person of Christ is paramount. While praising modern society’s emphasis on freedom, the Pope notes that the history of human freedom contains tragic elements as well, in which freedom turns into rebellion against Truth and Good. He states: ‘*Consequently, freedom itself needs to be set free. It is Christ who sets it free*: he ‘has set us free for freedom’ (cf. Gal. 5:1)’ (§86). The Pope continues:

It is urgent to rediscover and to set forth once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent. Rather, faith is a
lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a *truth to be lived out.*

. . . [Faith] is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (cf. Jn. 14:6). (§88)

Finally, in §103 there is an important passage which reveals the logic, as it were, of John Paul’s insistence on the centrality of Christ in any discussion of morality. The Pope reasons: if Christ is the redeemer of humankind, then it is precisely he who has given us “the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being. . . . *Only in the mystery of Christ’s Redemption do we discover the ‘concrete’ possibilities of man.*” Thus, to search for the full explanation of human nature and human actions outside of Christ would, the Pope believes, compromise the very meaning of the Christian profession that Christ is the Redeemer of the world. He bluntly says: “This is what is at stake: the *reality* of Christ’s redemption. *Christ has redeemed us!*” (§103).

Then John Paul concludes the encyclical with a brief meditation on Mary, the Mother of Mercy, in which he summarizes one last time his Christological point:

. . . 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 which come to us in the living communion of his Church. (§119)

That is, according to Pope John Paul II, what it means to live in the “‘splendor of the truth.’”

Now the fascinating question in this whole presentation, it seems to me, is this: does the new Christological, evangelical emphasis in the Church’s moral teaching, as exemplified in this most recent encyclical of Pope John Paul, mean that Catholic moral theology is disowning the previous emphasis which the Thomistic and scholastic traditions placed on natural law, universal human
nature, and the analysis of objective acts? And the answer, clearly, is: no. For the second chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*, subtitled "The Church and the discernment of certain tendencies in present-day moral theology," is quite explicitly a philosophical essay on the classic moral themes of freedom and law, conscience and truth, intrinsic evil and the moral act. Here the emphasis on Christ and the Gospel is much less than in Chapters One and Three.

Moreover, even in Chapters One and Three traces of the anthropological, philosophical moral argument can also be found. In chapter one, for example, John Paul reasserts the traditional Catholic teaching on natural law, which holds — contrary to the erroneous impression many have of this theory — that every human person, created by God with a rational intellect and an immortal soul, thereby possesses a knowledge of right and wrong inscribed in their hearts. In a footnote, the Pope cites Thomas' famous definition of the natural law in the *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2: "participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura," "the participation of the rational creature in God's eternal law" (see §12).

In his meditation on martyrdom in chapter three, John Paul notes:

> In this witness to the absoluteness of the moral good Christians are not alone: they are supported by the moral sense present in peoples and by the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West, from which the interior and mysterious workings of God's Spirit are not absent. (§94)

And in support of this, he cites the ancient Latin poet Juvenal, who wrote that one should "consider it the greatest of crimes to prefer survival to honor and, out of love of physical life, to lose the very reason for living" (§94). Finally, the very first line of *Veritatis Splendor*, it should be pointed out, refers not to Christ, but to God the Creator and the masterpiece of his creation, which is the intelligent and free human being: "The splendor of truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator and, in a special way, in man, created in the image and likeness of God" (see Genesis 1:26).
In conclusion, I believe that these two different emphases in the Pope's most recent encyclical — the Christological, evangelical emphasis on the one hand and the anthropological, philosophical emphasis on the other — do not stand in contradiction to each other but in a certain degree of positive tension. I acknowledge that this tension is not fully resolved in Veritatis Splendor, and so some inconsistencies, or at least some unanswered questions, remain. But I believe that this is no different than the situation found in contemporary Catholic theology as a whole which, following the line marked out by Vatican II, is seeking both to ground itself ever more deeply in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God and the Light of the World, and at the same time to find a way to engage in a dialogue with the modern world in which God’s grace is also at work, even in places where the name of Christ or of God himself may not be explicitly acknowledged.

Perhaps here Veritatis Splendor has its own contribution to make to contemporary systematic theology by its apt reminder that “it is precisely on the path of the moral life that the way of salvation is open to all” (§3). This summarizes well the important doctrine of Vatican II found in Lumen Gentium, §16 (which the encyclical cites): viz., that salvation may be attained by all people who seek God as he is known to them, or who, even though they do not have an explicit knowledge of God, nevertheless seek to lead an upright life. It also reflects the Pope’s repeated plea to modern society to restore the link between truth and freedom, as he proclaimed with impassioned conviction last August on a field outside Denver, citing John 8:32: “Only the truth will make you free!” Thirty years after Vatican II, on the verge of the third millennium, Pope John Paul II is saying in his latest encyclical that all people, by the grace and revelation of God consummated in Jesus Christ — even if they do not explicitly know Christ or God himself — all people can come to “know the truth and the truth will set them free.” And the splendor of that truth, the Pope professes in Veritatis Splendor, is alone to be found in its fullness shining on the face of Jesus Christ.