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Truth and Martyrdom: The Structure of Discipleship in Veritatis Splendor

Cover Page Footnote
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Early in February, I was privileged to participate in a gathering of forty-five predominantly Catholic philosophers and theologians to discuss John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*. The lead paper by one of this country's most prominent Catholic philosophers was excellent, as was the ensuing discussion. Most of this discussion focused on the second of the encyclical's three chapters, the chapter that deals with "some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations [that] are incompatible with revealed truth" (§29). What to my mind was conspicuously missing from the day's discussion was any attention devoted to either the first or (especially) the third chapters of the encyclical. The first chapter is a study of the nature of Christian discipleship, examined through the lens of St. Matthew's account of Jesus' meeting with the rich young man (Matthew 19). The third chapter is largely a discussion of the significance of Christian martyrdom. In the course of the discussion that day, the issue of discipleship was mentioned rarely, and the subject of martyrdom never came up. In concentrating almost exclusively on the second chapter, the group did not even attempt to locate the encyclical's critique of particular "trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations" within the context provided by *Veritatis Splendor*, namely that of Christian discipleship. In doing so this group mirrored much of the general response to *Veritatis Splendor*, which has been to focus almost exclusively on the second chapter. It is my goal to try to shift this focus, and to highlight the primacy of discipleship for rightly understanding *Veritatis Splendor*.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, the Pope is trying to tell us something
about a notion that is central to our lives: freedom. The argument is that freedom must be connected with the pursuit of truth. Since it is the truth that sets us free (§55), “genuine freedom involves seeking the truth and adhering to it once it is found” (§56). This point resonates with one made in the song “Me and Bobby McGee,” written by Kris Kristofferson and sung by Janis Joplin. (I might add as an aside the Kristofferson was a bright guy, having been a Rhodes Scholar before getting into the singing and acting business.) In “Me and Bobby McGee,” Kristofferson writes “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” The notion of freedom that Kristofferson is criticizing is a peculiarly modern one, which emphasizes “freedom from” (e.g., any particular demand or constraint) rather than “freedom for” (e.g., the pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful). This modern notion of freedom as “freedom from” is what both Kris Kristofferson and John Paul II are challenging.

The modern notion of freedom as “freedom from” is exemplified by those Americans who oppose government subsidized universal medical coverage or are against gun control because America ought to be a “free” country. For these people, it doesn’t matter whether they or their neighbors actually have a gun, or can actually obtain access to basic medical care, but that everybody is free to buy a gun or seek medical care without government constraints. As Kristofferson observes in “Me and Bobby McGee,” for 40 million poor Americans who can’t afford medical coverage, and for the poor generally, this “‘freedom from’ is what you have when you in reality have nothing, and serves as a kind of delusion for those who live in the reality of actually having nothing. Thus, this freedom is simply having nothing left to lose.

Kristofferson’s depiction of modern freedom as that state in which you have “nothing left to lose” is strikingly similar to the notion of freedom as “doing whatever one wants” which Veritatis Splendor criticizes. One comes to understand freedom as “doing whatever one wants” when freedom no longer has a goal or a telos, when there is no longer anything sacred, anything with intrinsic and inalienable worth and dignity, when freedom is no longer ordered to the pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful. In insisting that freedom is only found within the bounds of truthfulness,
*Veritatis Splendor* quotes the words of Jesus that "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (§34).

The reader will notice the negative note thus far, a discussion of what is not being affirmed in *Veritatis Splendor*. In doing so, I'm following the approach of many commentators on the encyclical. But if I were to continue to focus on what *Veritatis Splendor* criticizes, I would fail to capture the central, constructive vision of the Christian life at the heart of *Veritatis Splendor*. This vision is presented in the form of the question the rich young man asks Jesus in the 19th chapter of St. Matthew’s gospel: "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" (§8). Jesus first responds by telling the young man to keep the commandments, a response sometimes interpreted to legitimate a "minimalist" understanding of Christian morality. The young man does not leave the matter here, and neither, emphasizes *Veritatis Splendor*, should we. We, like the young man, must probe further. When the young man does this, he is told by Jesus "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (§16). Here we have arrived at the heart of *Veritatis Splendor*. While the commandments are conditions for full life in Christ, they are not the heart of life in Christ (§17). The Christian life is not fundamentally about what rules and principles one must follow to be in the good graces of God and God’s church. Rather, the heart of the Christian life is about discipleship, following Jesus when, and as, and how Jesus calls us.

Too often, the following of rules and principles degenerates into what is often called a "minimalist" Christian morality. This truncated vision of Christian life sees most of the practice of life as morally neutral, to be done with as we please, as long as we stay on the right side of rules x, y, and z. This understanding of Christian life is not only not the good news of Jesus, it is not even a correct understanding of the Decalogue. The ten commandments are not a self-contained code of moral principles, but a response in gratitude by God’s people to God’s deliverance of them out of slavery and bondage:

The moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out
of love for humans. It is a response of love, according to the statement made in Deuteronomy about the fundamental commandment: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children” (Dt. 6:4-7). Thus the moral life, caught up in the gratuitousness of God’s love, is called to reflect his glory: “For the one who loves God it is enough to be pleasing to the one whom he loves: for no greater reward should be sought than that love itself; charity in fact is of God in such a way that God himself is charity.” (§10)

Obedience to the ten commandments is only properly understood as a desire to honor God, to be like God. It is to this goal that the commandments serve to assist, to enable disciples. The commands themselves are justified in terms of Israel’s ongoing relationship with their God, and thus are told “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (§10).

Although we may be tempted, perhaps we have even been told, that Christian life consists primarily in the fulfillment of the rules of God and the church, Veritatis Splendor insists that this view is deformed and will never make sense of the Christian gospel as really being good news. What is important is not any moralistic minimum, but responding to the call of Jesus which goes out to the rich young man, the call of “Come, follow me,” which is “the new law of the church and of every Christian (§114).

It is to be inspired to follow Christ that enables the Christian to live faithfully. Thus, near the end of the encyclical, the Christian life is summarized as “abandoning oneself to [Jesus], 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). Only when the Christian’s gaze is affixed upon Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit invoked to live out that journey, can the
demands of Christian faith not become onerously burdensome. Thus, in trying to understand Christian morality, the first questions are: Are we followers of Christ? Do our lives come from God, depend on God, and pursue a return to God? Is God our source and God our goal?

At present, too much debate about the Christian life focuses on specifying and nuancing “how we must do x and not do y” (“follow the commandments”) without locating this debate within the context of how Christ is faithfully followed? (“Come, follow me”). It is only when the former is firmly located in the context of the latter that the gospel truly functions as good news for the Christian.

This brings us back to where we began, to the true meaning of freedom for Christians. Christians cannot understand “freedom” as freedom from any constraints, such that the demands of the gospel are seen as unreasonable demands upon our life, liberty, and happiness. That is not Christian freedom. Christian freedom begins, as St Augustine notes, “to be free from crimes . . . such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege and so forth. . . . But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom (§13). Following rules can enable us to avoid evil, but perfect freedom lies in the active pursuit of our true good. Our true good lies in our pursuit of God in the path of true righteousness. Faithfulness to God is faithfulness to the truth, and that truth can never be alien to our freedom. Having emphasized this, let not a hint of antinomianism enter here. The path of perfection in our journey toward God cannot be navigated properly without a knowledge of the basic perils to be avoided. Thus, Veritatis Splendor quotes Augustine again, that “to the extent to which we serve God we are free, while to the extent that we follow the law of sin, we are still slaves” (§17). Once we are captured by the gospel, impelled to live it out, its demands become freedom. For “those who are impelled by love and ‘walk by the spirit’ (Gal. 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God’s law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out” (§18).

How, then, is this to be lived out? Are there not numerous contemporary problems which Jesus simply does not address
directly by his life? Do we not need universal precepts to apply the
gospel to these situations? Again, I have no wish to deny the need
for or place of moral precepts, but if we wish to follow faithfully
Jesus’ call to “Come, follow me,” there is a wisdom needed that
is more basic than knowledge of precepts, there is a form of
guidance that is more sure than the precepts outlined by moral
theologians. Those who put into practice most faithfully the faith of
Christ are the examples to whom Christians first turn for guidance.
It is in God’s faithful people, the body of Christ, that we see Christ
in action. And the body of Christ is best revealed in the lives of the
saints and the sacrifices of Christian martyrs. Although there is
certainly a place and a need for moral principles, what is of
primary importance is the vision of the imitation of Christ,
following the example of Jesus and that of his faithful body as
exemplified by the saints and martyrs.

Of Veritatis Splendor’s three chapters, the second (and longest)
(§28-83) is devoted to a discussion of “some trends of theological
thinking and certain philosophical affirmations [that] are
incompatible with revealed truth” (§29). The central tenet of these
trends is the denial of the existence of intrinsically wrong acts that
can be absolutely prohibited (§75). While Veritatis Splendor
criticizes these trends on a number of fronts, the most important
criticism, as I see it, is that the denial of the existence of
intrinsically evil acts renders the wisdom in the lives of the saints
and the deaths of martyrs profoundly suspect (§92):

The unacceptability of . . . ethical theories, which
deny the existence of negative moral norms regard-
ing certain kinds of behavior, norms which are
valid without exception, is confirmed in a particu-
larly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom. (§90)

For if there are no intrinsically wrong acts, if the rightness or
wrongness of an act is determined, as consequentialism advances,
through a weighing of pre-moral goods and evils, then the witness
of the martyrs could be undermined by a revision in the weighing
of the pre-moral goods, which concludes that more good could have
been gained if the martyr had sinned and saved his or her life.
Veritatis Splendor appeals to the inviolability of the witness of the martyrs to make sense of and justify the absolute prohibition of certain acts as intrinsically evil. The "never-to-be-done" nature of these wrong acts is manifested in the witness of the martyrs.

It is possible, and in some contexts appropriate, to sum up this point in the moral maxim "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong." However, this point is made most deeply and profoundly not in any moral maxim but in the lives and deaths of the martyrs. Faithful believers often faced martyrdom because they were unwilling to do certain acts, even at the cost of their lives — even at the cost of their children's lives. If we do not acknowledge the absolute wrongness of certain acts, then it no longer makes sense unconditionally to revere the martyrs as guides for Christians. Thus, Veritatis Splendor (§91) discusses the story of Susanna (Daniel 13), the witness in the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6), the martyrdoms of the deacon Stephen and the apostle James (Acts 6-7; 12), and the countless others who accepted martyrdom rather than perform evil acts, such as idolatrously burning incense before the statue of the Emperor (Revlation 13). To take just one contemporary example, consider the death of Oscar Romero. If we could conclude that a more muted criticism of the El Salvadoran military would have significantly lengthened his life, and that in so doing pre-moral goods could have been better maximized, would that make his death foolishness? Passing by the question of the very commensurability of consequences in such a scenario, suffering to honor God and God's way with the world will always be foolishness to the Greeks, to those without the wisdom of the saints.

So what are some acts that are always wrong? According to the emphases of Veritatis Splendor, contemporary idolatry is likely to come in economic and political forms. Here are some examples given: "Enterprises which for any reason — selfish or ideological, commercial or totalitarian — lead to the enslavement of human beings, buying or selling them like merchandise" or "reducing persons by violence to use-value or a source of profit" (§100). These and all other acts which are contrary to the dignity of human beings are intrinsically evil. If you find the above examples overly general, obscure, or somehow hard to follow, and thus doubt their "intrinsically evil" or "never-to-be-done" character, let me give
you a more specific example of an act which is always wrong: taking a water hose, putting it well down someone’s throat, and turning on the water full blast until you blow out their guts. That’s always wrong!

What are some of the consequences of failing to acknowledge that certain acts are always and intrinsically wrong, of denying that we can adequately articulate aspects of the moral truth that is God, the source of all goodness and truth? One common result, which we see all too often, is the surrender of human persons to economic and political interests. Thus,

if one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over and each person tends to make full use of the means at his disposal in order to impose his own interests or his own opinion, with no regard for the rights of others . . . (§99)

Of course, these are generally the interests of government leaders or others in places and/or positions of power. All governments which deny the transcendent source of true good and the transcendent basis for the dignity of the human person tend towards totalitarianism. Veritatis Splendor notes that Marxism has been the foremost of these totalitarian conceptions, but also emphasizes the totalitarian nature of governments which ally democracy and moral relativism: “As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism” (§101). In our contemporary situation, we have more reason to fear democratic totalitarianism than Marxist totalitarianism.

Finally, in thinking about Christian morality, Christians must be careful not to say something along the lines of ‘Well, we don’t do these things because we believe in ‘faith’ rather than ‘reason.’ ’’ Christians must make no opposition between reason and Christian faith. All moral truth is from God. God’s demands and commands can never be alienating, because the call of God is always for the true good. If we find the demands of the gospel alienating, if grace corrects our moral reasoning, it is surely not because grace is in
opposition to our nature. Rather, it will be that we have failed as moral reasoners.

Without a commitment to the view that there are intrinsically evil acts that can never be right, we cannot ultimately justify, nor even make sense of, the great acts of the saints and heroic sacrifices of Christian martyrs. If none of the demands of Christian life are categorical, then we will be unable to explain how it might be incumbent upon some Christians to undergo martyrdom. Furthermore, we cannot make sense of the life and death of the example for all Christian martyrs, namely the death and resurrection of Our Lord. For in Jesus' dying we learn that we must hold fast to doing no evil, that we must suffer evil rather than do violence. The willingness to do evil, namely to harm an innocent person, is exemplified by Caiaphas, the one who condemns Jesus, saying that it is better to make one innocent person suffer for the benefit of others (John 18:14).

Although in refusing to do evil Christians may be called to suffer greatly, Christians know that God vindicates this manner of life. In resurrecting Jesus, God has told us definitively that it is in the unwillingness to do evil that true life is shown, that God honors and raises those faithful to God's peace and God's way of nonviolent love. We can thank John Paul II for reminding us of this in Veritatis Splendor.