

V e r i t a t i s S p l e n d o r

AND THE RENEWAL OF MORAL THEOLOGY

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Veritatis splendor: Moral Life as Transfigured Life

J. A. DiNoia, O.P.

Pope John Paul II put his signature to *Veritatis splendor* on August 6, 1993, the feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord. While the encyclical did not become public until October, considerable significance attaches to the date on which documents of this magnitude are actually signed. *Veritatis splendor* is arguably the most important encyclical of this pontificate, and will probably be judged to be one of the most significant of this century. I have a single aim in this paper: I want to argue that the date upon which this great encyclical was signed provides a key to unlocking its meaning, that transfiguration and communion are at its heart.

But I shall begin with a quotation, not from *Veritatis splendor*, but from *Pastores dabo vobis*: "There are spiritual and religious values present in today's culture and man. . . cannot help but hunger and thirst for God. However, the Christian religion is often regarded as just one religion among many or reduced to nothing more than a social ethic at the service of man. As a result, its amazing novelty in human history is quite often not apparent. It is a 'mystery,' the event of the coming of the Son of God who becomes man and gives to those who welcome him 'the power to become the children of God' (Jn 1:12). It is the proclamation, nay the gift of a personal covenant of love and life between God and man."¹

In these powerful words, Pope John Paul is trying to get us to see the stunning truth of the destiny to which human beings are called, a truth proclaimed by Christ and a destiny made possible for us by his passion, death, and resurrection. Human persons are called to nothing less than communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To put it as forcefully as possible, Christianity affirms that the triune God could not bring about a more intimate union with created persons than that which has begun in Baptism and is to be consummated in the life to come. Ultimate communion involves nothing less than becoming part of the Trinitarian family.

Just as Christ is Son by nature—a member of the divine family of the Trinity in virtue of his being the only Son of the Father—so we human persons are to be sons and daughters by adoption. Our fellowship with Christ and with each other in him brings us into the divine Trinitarian family.

For a variety of reasons, we have lost a sense of the “amazing novelty” of this message. For one thing, we simply take it for granted. For another, our culture inclines us to see all religions as in some sense equally concerned with something vaguely called the Transcendent and more or less equally fit to lead people to experience and enjoy it.

One of the overriding objectives of *Veritatis splendor* is to affirm that the Christian moral life makes sense only within this understanding of our calling to “life on high in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14). If we are destined to enjoy ultimate communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and with each other in them—then we must change. We must be transformed into people who can enjoy this high destiny.

As the encyclical strives to make clear, this transformation will be a conformation: the more we become like Christ, the more surely do we discover our true selves, the unique persons created by the triune God to share in the divine life and to enjoy the family life of the Trinity. A moral life is a life lived in Christ and through his grace. The ultimate aim of a morally upright life is not so much to “please God” by successfully keeping the Commandments as to render us fit for the eternal company of the triune God. We become good by seeking the Good.

The encyclical makes this clear in the long meditation on the encounter between Christ and the rich young man with which it begins. In response to the young man’s question, “What good must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus says, “There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (see Mt 19:16–22). Our Lord’s teaching here indicates that only by seeking the Ultimate Good—God himself—can we become good. In other words, he connects keeping the Commandments with becoming good. The more we seek the Ultimate Good through the keeping of the Commandments, the more we become good and the more fit we become to enjoy the communion with the triune God that is our destiny. Only in Christ can we discover and become enabled to

seek the Good through the keeping of the Commandments.

Thus, in the encyclical's first chapter, Pope John Paul II summons us to see the Christian moral vision as a matter of increasing transformation in and intimacy with Jesus Christ. Then, in the second chapter, the pope takes up some of the fundamental principles of the Christian moral life understood in this perspective. In taking up these topics, *Veritatis splendor* is unique among the documents of the magisterium. There has been a great deal of teaching on specific issues of Christian morality, like sexual and social ethics, for example, but this is the first occasion when there has been a sustained discussion of the most basic principles of the Christian moral life. In effect, the question in the encyclical is not simply how to act morally in this or that situation, but the more radical question, Why act morally at all? The resounding response offered by the encyclical is framed in terms of our destiny in Christ to enjoy communion with the triune God and with each in God.

It is true that in this chapter, the pope takes up in turn the topics of authentic freedom, conscience, sin, and the nature of the moral act. In part, his concern is to correct certain mistaken ideas about these matters put forward in recent years by some Catholic theologians and popularized among people in the Church. His concern here is not academic but pastoral: mistaken ideas about these issues can undermine a true Christian moral life. But more important than what the encyclical denies is what it affirms.

When talking about the big changes that Vatican II has caused in Catholic life, most of us tend to think immediately about changes in discipline and liturgy. In fact, one of the most dramatic shifts occurred in the area of moral theology. After a practically undisputed reign of nearly four hundred years, legalism (and the kind of casuistry associated with it), which had governed a lot of Catholic life and sacramental practice, slipped away without so much as an obituary notice.

The reasons for the powerful hold of legalism in moral theology since the Council of Trent are complex and could be the subject of a lengthy discussion all their own. The important thing to notice for our purposes today is that legalistic moral theology tended to put matters not in terms of good and evil but in terms of the permitted and the forbidden. In this style of moral theology, moral norms were viewed more as laws to be enforced and obeyed than

as principles for a good life, lived in view of God's invitation to ultimate communion. In a legalistic perspective, happiness is a kind of extrinsic reward for a life lived in conformity to an arduous code of conduct. The framework is contractual rather than virtue-centered and personalist.

The fundamental importance of *Veritatis splendor* is that it embodies a complete rejection of this legalistic moral theology. It seeks to recover and reaffirm a more complete biblical, patristic, and authentic Thomistic vision of the whole of the Christian life and to locate the moral good within this vision. According to this vision, happiness is the flourishing of a life lived in seeking the good in order to realize and enjoy personal communion with the triune God and with other persons in God.

A simple example will help to dramatize the nature of this shift away from legalism. If you tell a child to stop eating cookies before dinner, and he asks you why, you have at least two possible answers to give. You could say, "I'm your mother, and I told you to stop. I make the rules in this house." Or you could say, "You'll ruin your appetite." The first answer is an authoritarian one, a very simplified form of the kind of explanation associated with legalistic moral theology. The second answer appeals in a simple way to what is good and bad for you. The new encyclical exemplifies, at a highly sophisticated and theologically dense level, the second kind of answer.

In its rejection of legalism, the new encyclical is solidly in the tradition of Vatican Council II. That council called specifically for a renewal of moral theology that would restore to primacy the biblical categories of love, grace, discipleship and transformation in Christ.² The council thus inaugurated a period of tremendous creative ferment in which a variety of new avenues were explored. The new encyclical reviews twenty-five years of reflection and debate in moral theology and resoundingly affirms the best trends in the ongoing renewal of Catholic theology, and at the same time expresses a series of cautionary notes about certain trends in moral theology that seem to be going in the wrong direction. But the crucial point that must not be lost in the controversy that the encyclical has generated among some Catholic authors is the affirmation that morality makes sense only within the perspective of the call to ultimate communion.

The first Truth here is the truth of God himself, as embodied in the person and teaching of Jesus. If we want to live in the truth, we must be conformed to the Truth who is Christ himself. Our happiness is to be found in seeking and attaining the ultimate Good. Moral goodness in human beings is a participation in the divine goodness.

If we are to enjoy communion with the triune God, then we must become fit for it. Interpersonal communion with God, though, is “natural” only to uncreated persons. However, for created persons, who are also sinners, such communion is possible only through grace. It is through the grace of Christ, and, specifically, through the transformation that this grace makes possible, that we are rendered “fit” participants in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is at this point that the central significance of the mystery of the Transfiguration emerges.

We are all familiar with the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration. Matthew, Mark and Luke agree in the basic details: Peter, James and John, witnessed a remarkable transformation in the countenance of Christ. The ordinary, dusty Jesus who was their companion and master was transformed before their eyes in a dazzling display of glory. The disciples were at a loss even to describe what they saw. Jesus’ clothes became whiter, as Mark’s gospel quaintly puts it, than any bleach could make them. In fact, as would become clear to the disciples later, what they saw was not so much a “transfiguration” by which Jesus was changed into something he had not been beforehand, but rather a revelation in which his true nature was exposed to view. For a fleeting moment, the veil that concealed his glory from their sight was removed and they beheld the glory of God’s only Son.

But we need to go deeper. We need to ask why Christ allowed the disciples to behold his glory. St. Leo the Great can be of assistance at this point. In a sermon on the mystery of the Transfiguration, Leo suggested that there were at least two reasons why Christ revealed his glory to these chosen witnesses.³

The first reason, Pope St. Leo suggests, was “to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of his disciples, and to prevent the humiliation of his voluntary suffering from disturbing the faith of those who had witnessed the surpassing glory that lay concealed.”

In other words, when the disciples saw Christ dead on the cross, they would not despair or lose heart. Those who had been to the top of Mount Tabor—according to tradition, the locus of the Transfiguration—would know that beneath the appearance of defeat and death lay the reality of victory and life. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, as we might put it, the cross constituted a victory over sin and death, a victory that would be confirmed and made manifest in the Resurrection on the third day.

But, Leo goes on, there was another reason why Christ let his disciples witness the Transfiguration. Christ wanted more than to sustain the faith of his disciples in the face of events that would sorely try it. In the Transfiguration he revealed not only his own hidden glory, but our future glory as well. In short, he wanted to show us what would become of us. “The whole body of Christ,” Leo says, “was to understand the kind of transformation that it would receive as his gift. The members of that body were to look forward to a share in that glory which first blazed out in Christ their head.” Naturally, from our point of view, we seem to be sinking into decrepitude rather than rising to glory! But, again, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18).

It is Leo’s second reason for the Transfiguration that sheds light directly on the meaning of the encyclical. Let the text of the encyclical speak for itself at this point: “The light of God’s face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ, ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15), the ‘reflection of God’s glory’ (Heb 1:3), ‘full of grace and truth’ (Jn 1:14). Christ is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (Jn 4:16). Consequently, the decisive answer to every one of man’s questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given in Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself. . . .” (VS 2.2). Moral life—the struggle to become good by seeking the good—finds its ultimate pattern and principle in Jesus Christ. Why? Because in him, the perfect image of God is found, and it is in being conformed to him that the image of God in us is made perfect. The Transfiguration signals to us that our transformation must be a conformation. It is this conformation that gives us our entry into the Trinitarian family. As we pray in one of the Sunday prefaces: “Father, . . . [y]ou sent him as one like ourselves, though

free from sin, that you might see and love in us what you see and love in Christ."⁴

What must be made clear here is that this conformation does not amount to a mere conformity. The conformation to Christ which is the principle of our transformation is not a mere cloning but the realization of our distinctive and unique personal identity. This must be so, for otherwise the communion to which this transformation is directed could not be consummated. The image of God in us consists precisely in the spiritual capacities of knowing and loving that make interpersonal communion possible. But authentic interpersonal communion presupposes the full realization, not the absorption or dissolution, of the individual persons who enter into it. Thus, if Christ is to be the principle of our transformation, it can only mean that in being conformed to him, we each discover and realize our unique identities as persons.

This is an astounding claim, and we should pause over it. Consider the following saying of the Lord (I shall quote the saying from Matthew, but in each of the Synoptic Gospels it is placed, significantly, just before the account of the Transfiguration): "If a man wants to be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his life? Or what will he give in return for his life?" (Mt 16:24–26; cf. Mk 8:34–37; Lk 9:23–25). What Christ is asserting, in effect, is that each person will find his or her true self only by being conformed to Christ.

We need only to consider our ordinary experience to grasp how startling, even outrageous, Christ's assertion is. None of us, whether as teachers or parents or pastors—no matter how inflated our conceptions of ourselves or how confident our sense of our abilities—would ever dare say to any of our charges that they will find their true selves by imitating us. Naturally, we do sometimes feel that they would be a lot better off if they followed our example at certain points! But we cannot want any children or students of ours simply to be clones of us. On the contrary, we want them to discover themselves, to become independent and self-confident (even if not, these days, self-supporting!). None of us could say to another person: you will find your true self only if you imitate me.

Yet this is precisely what Christ asserts. In effect this means

that an indefinite number of human persons will find their distinctive identities by being conformed to Christ. A moment's reflection shows us that only the Son of God could make such an assertion. Only the inexhaustibly rich *perfect* Image of God who is the Person of the Son could constitute the principle and pattern for the transformation and fulfillment of every human person who has ever lived.

The encyclical locates the moral life within this all-encompassing mystery of communion and transfiguration.

Since we are persons, and precisely as persons, we must freely embrace the personal communion that is offered to us by the triune God as our ultimate happiness and good. Christ's grace empowers us to do so, but it empowers us to do so freely. The meaning of authentic freedom—a central theme of *Veritatis splendor*—lies here. The encyclical is critical of modern notions of freedom for their exaltation of individualism and autonomy. Christian freedom is not a matter of untrammelled choice, but a participation in God's freedom. In effect authentic freedom is the God-given capacity to enter in a personal way in the realization of our true happiness. Precisely as persons invited into personal communion, we must freely embrace this invitation or, of course, fail to. In this way, persons are different from non-personal, or as we usually put it, the non- or sub-rational creatures with whom we share the cosmos. Chipmunks and cabbages cannot embrace their good, or for that matter fail to. Only persons are free to join their hearts and souls to the endeavor to realize their true good—which, as we have seen, is the authentically personal good of ultimate communion.

It follows that, since we are persons, and precisely as persons, our actions count for something. We do not become good, or fail to become good, willy-nilly. Nor do we become good, or fail to become good, once and for all—at least on this side of the grave. No, in each action, and in some actions more than in others, we choose the good, or fail to. And through each action, and through some more than others, we become good, or fail to. In the moral life—which is nothing other than the whole realm of our human actions—something is happening to us. We are growing into fitness, or failing to, for the consummation of our already initiated communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ is the principle and pattern of a gradual transformation—to which we freely and in