



saint mary's press

Primary Source Readings in
Christian Morality

Thaddeus Ostrowski
Robert Smith, FSC, PhD, general editor

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Introduction

by Robert Smith, FSC, PhD

Even if you are too young to have seen the original 1940 Walt Disney animated film *Pinocchio*, most of us have heard the well-known if little-heeded advice that Jiminy Cricket offered Pinocchio: “Let your conscience be your guide.”

Strange as it may seem, Jiminy’s advice aligns with both the Western classical philosophical tradition and the teaching practice of the Catholic Church in matters concerning moral issues and ethical decisions. From Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, we have been told to follow our conscience. In fact, Catholics have been taught that we *must* follow our conscience, for that is where God speaks to us in the silence of our inmost being (adapted from *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et Spes]*, no. 16).

Ah! If only it were so easy! Following one’s conscience, like so many things in life, is relatively easy in theory. However, when confronted with difficult, real-life, complicated moral decisions, coming to terms with a decision of conscience is not an easy task. Yet it is a responsibility that each of us must take on.

Those of us who come at moral decision making from a faith stance and within a community of believers are

given a lot of assistance and guidance that helps to form our conscience. The Catholic Church's teaching is a bit more nuanced than Jiminy Cricket's straightforward advice. The Church clearly teaches that we must follow our conscience, but the Church is careful and insightful when it teaches that we must follow a *well-formed* conscience. You might then ask, how do I develop a well-formed conscience?

A crucial, and first, guideline is that we form our conscience for ourselves but not by ourselves alone. When all is said and done, we are each responsible for the decisions we make, both good and bad. However, before we make a final decision, we must "do our homework." Not to seek advice, not to do the necessary research, not to listen to the wisdom of others with greater experience, not to consult experts . . . all can lead to an ill-informed decision.

It is easy to believe that we know it all and that others—parents (especially!), teachers, authority figures, "the Church"—can't teach us anything. As we grow older and have gained more life experience, we realize how profoundly we all need the insights, wisdom, experience, support, and guidance of others in our lives, especially when we are facing major decisions that carry significant moral import.

There are many sources of moral knowledge and resources that can help us shape a well-formed conscience. Among these are personal and communal experience (sometimes referred to as the "*sensus fidelium*" or "sense of the faithful"), the sciences, academic scholarship, Scripture, and the collective wisdom of the Church's two-

thousand-year Spirit-guided insights and teachings. Each of these sources and resources is important; however, for Catholics, when it comes to developing a well-formed conscience, the official teaching of the Church takes pride of place and has a privileged (which is not to say *only*) role to play in the formation of our conscience.

This book offers a variety of Church documents and articles that can help assist us in the formation of our moral conscience. It is structured around the Ten Commandments as its organizing principle. These commandments have served as the primary shapers of and foundational guidelines for the Judeo-Christian moral conscience for three millennia. The first two chapters provide an introduction to moral theology. The next ten chapters follow in order of the presentation of the Ten Commandments in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Each chapter begins with an excerpt from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* addressing the topic of the chapter. This is followed by a text from a pope, a bishop, a body of bishops, or a member of the clergy, and then an essay or article by a layperson. These texts, each of them and all of them collectively, reflect the wisdom tradition of the Church and its insights into the human person. Each chapter concludes with a writing from a member of the clergy or a layperson that helps us place the commandment into our everyday lives. Together these writings can serve as one source of assistance and guidance in the process of forming our moral conscience when we are faced with difficult decisions.

Let your conscience be your guide? Of course! Jiminy Cricket's advice was right! But let it be a well-formed

conscience, informed and guided by the Church's teachings as well as the thoughtful reflections, experience, wisdom, and knowledge of others who help form the Body of Christ and contribute to the community's "sensus fidelium."

Starting with Love

Moral conscience¹, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil.² It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking. (CCC, no. 1777)

conscience

awareness of right and wrong and a sense of duty to do the good

Introduction

When Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli was elected as the 261st pope of the Roman Catholic Church at the age of seventy-six on October 28, 1958, and took the name John XXIII, few anticipated the impact he would have on the Church. Due to his age, many assumed his papacy would be short and uneventful. Pope John XXIII indeed passed away fewer than five years after his election, but not before he

called for the Second Vatican Council, also known as Vatican Council II. The Second Vatican Council, as one account goes, “threw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see in.” The times were changing, and so, it seems, was the Church.

Today the meaning of the Second Vatican Council and the changes it introduced are still under debate, but its legacy is felt every Sunday when Mass is celebrated in the common language of the community rather than in Latin, and in every classroom where moral theology is taught. The council was guided by the complementary trends of *aggiornamento*, which means “bringing up to date,” and *ressourcement*, a desire to recover authentic traditions from the Church’s past. Nowhere are these complementary movements more evident than in *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*. Promulgated by John XXIII’s successor, Paul VI, on December 7, 1965, the document declares, “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*The Church in the Modern World*, no. 4). By “opening the windows,” John XXIII had asked the Church to read “the signs of the times,” to draw on the vast resources of its traditions (*ressourcement*), and to speak the good news in a way relevant and meaningful to people today (*aggiornamento*). As a result, the Church asserted in the opening line (from which the document takes its name, *Gaudium et Spes*, meaning “joy and hope”) that it shares the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of all people.

But who—and what—are these people? *The Church in the Modern World* makes an invaluable contribution to moral theology by exploring the nature and dignity of the human person amidst the confusions and contradictions of the present day. Turning to Scripture, the document states that human beings have an inherent dignity because they are created in the image of God, that they are social beings who find fulfillment in community, and that people are weighed down and wounded by the power of sin. Despite the power of sin, human beings are blessed with freedom, conscience, and the intellect to seek truth.

freedom

the ability to respond to God's invitation to love and do the good

Many find in Vatican Council II a spirit of optimism and openness, particularly in its stirring description of the conscience.

Perhaps it is this optimism that emboldened James F. Keenan, SJ, who writes that he begins his courses on moral theology with the topic of love. For him, starting with love is one more way to “open the windows,” draw on the sources of Scripture and tradition, and relate them to human experiences. Together, the council's teaching on the true freedom of the human person and Keenan's reflections on love begin our exploration of moral theology and the human person.

Excerpts from *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*)

by the Second Vatican Council

Chapter I

The Dignity of the Human Person

12. According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown.

But what is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. The result is doubt and anxiety. The Church certainly understands these problems. Endowed with light from God, she can offer solutions to them, so that man's true situation can be portrayed and his defects explained, while at the same time his dignity and destiny are justly acknowledged.

For Sacred Scripture teaches that man was created "to the image of God," is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God's glory. "What is man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him

rule over the works of your hands, putting all things under his feet” (Ps. 8:5–7).

But God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.

Therefore, as we read elsewhere in Holy Scripture God saw “all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

13. Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God. Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, but their senseless minds were darkened and they served the creature rather than the Creator. What divine revelation makes known to us agrees with experience. Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his

liberty

the ability to make rational choices without external constraint

divine revelation

truths God has made known to humans, definitively revealed through Scripture and Sacred Tradition

beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things.

Therefore man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains. But the Lord Himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out that “prince of this world” (John 12:31) who held him in the bondage of sin. For sin has diminished man, blocking his path to fulfillment.

The call to grandeur and the depths of misery, both of which are a part of human experience, find their ultimate and simultaneous explanation in the light of this revelation.

14. Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator. For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, wounded by sin, man experiences rebellious stirrings in his body. But the very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart.

Now, man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things. He plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart; God, Who probes the heart, awaits him there; there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God. Thus, when he recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter.

15. Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind. By relentlessly employing his talents through the ages he has indeed made progress in the practical sciences and in technology and the liberal arts. In our times he has won superlative victories, especially in his probing of the material world and in subjecting it to himself. Still he has always searched for more penetrating truths, and finds them. For his intelligence is not confined to observable data alone, but can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened.

The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be, for wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen.

Our era needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized. For the future of the world stands in peril unless

wiser men are forthcoming. It should also be pointed out that many nations, poorer in economic goods, are quite rich in wisdom and can offer noteworthy advantages to others.

It is, finally, through the gift of the Holy Spirit that man comes by faith to the contemplation and appreciation of the divine plan.

16. In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for

license

a disregard for principles of personal conduct and moral laws

truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.

17. Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly to be sure. Often however they foster it perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain “under the control of his own decisions,” so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. Since man’s freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God’s grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgment seat of God each man must render an account of his own life, whether he has done good or evil.

18. It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction. He rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person. He rebels against death because he bears

in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. All the endeavors of technology, though useful in the extreme, cannot calm his anxiety; for prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy that desire for higher life which is inescapably lodged in his breast.

Although the mystery of death utterly beggars the imagination, the Church has been taught by divine revelation and firmly teaches that man has been created by God for a blissful purpose beyond the reach of earthly misery. In addition, that bodily death from which man would have been immune had he not sinned will be vanquished, according to the Christian faith, when man who was ruined by his own doing is restored to wholeness by an almighty and merciful Saviour. For God has called man and still calls him so that with his entire being he might be joined to Him in an endless sharing of a divine life beyond all corruption. Christ won this victory when He rose to life, for by His death He freed man from death. Hence to every thoughtful man a solidly established faith provides the answer to his anxiety about what the future holds for him. At the same time faith gives him the power to be united in Christ with his loved ones who have already been snatched away by death; faith arouses the hope that they have found true life with God.

Excerpt from *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*

by James F. Keenan, SJ

Starting with Love

I teach an introductory course on moral theology, and during my fifteen years teaching it, I only recently learned to begin my course on the topic of love. Not only did I not begin with love, I never even taught a class on it.

For me love was what the philosophers call “formal.” God loves us; we love God; we are called to morality as a response to that love, so let’s discuss morality. Admittedly, like all Christians I acknowledged that love has always been the foundation of my life and, in particular, my ethical vision. I also recognized that love was charity and that charity moved us. But I took it all for granted.

I began my course on freedom, a freedom for God, church, and neighbor. My mentor, Josef Fuchs, always started with freedom. He called this a basic freedom, a freedom in grace to realize the call of Christ. Others like Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Josef Ratzinger usually begin their writings on ethics with truth. They talk about the

formal

merely logical; independent of (or prior to) specific experience

charity

God’s love of humans, which through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit causes humans to love God and neighbor

need to base all ethics on truth. In many ways the tension between moral theologians and teachers of the moral magisterium has been the preference each side has for either freedom or truth.

But now I believe we need to start with the primacy of love and specifically the love of God. Why love?

If we start with love instead of freedom or truth, what happens? Why start discussions of morality and ethics with love? Let me give you three reasons—from the scriptures, theology, and the tradition rooted in human experience—for starting with the love of God.

First, the scriptures command it. Not only does Jesus teach us that the love of God is the first command, but the

temporal

pertaining to physical existence in time

flourishment

growth into full and healthy humanity

Ten Commandments themselves recognize the love and honor for God as the first commandment of all. On it depend all the other commandments. Knowing that the commandments were not imposed on us for God's pleasure, but rather for our benefit and our flourishing, by insisting on God's sovereignty, the first commandment makes

our dependency on God the very foundation of our happiness.

Second, the love of God precedes whatever else we discuss in theology, whether we speak temporally or metaphysically. For instance, love is how we understand God, for God is love. Karl Rahner tells us that because

God is love, God is triune, for God needs to be in God's self more than one person in order to be love, for the lover needs the beloved. Love also explains the creation. Again, Rahner tells us that because God is love, God "needs" to love more than God's self. For that reason God creates us so as to enter into love with us, to bring us into God's kingdom. Love also is the ground of our redemption, for "God so loved the world that God gave God's one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Love, too, is the way of our sanctification, for Jesus commanded us to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourselves. Finally, love is our goal, for in the kingdom we believe that we will be united forever with God and those who have gone before us. Thus, love is our understanding of God, creation, redemption, sanctification, and eschatological promise: In as much as theology is the study of God, then love is the beginning and end of theology, for God is love.

triune

three in one; adjective referring to the three persons in one God

metaphysical

pertaining to the essence of things beyond what can be perceived by the five senses

sanctification

being made holy or pure; growth in holiness

redemption

delivery from sin; atonement for guilt

Listen to how the first Letter of John comprehensively presents it:

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed God's love among us: God sent God's one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

¹⁶God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like God.

¹⁹We love because God first loved us. ²⁰If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates one's brother or sister, that one is a liar. For anyone who does not love one's brother or sister, whom we have seen, cannot love God, whom we have not seen. ²¹And God has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 7–11, 16–17, 19–21)

A third reason for beginning with the love of God is that human experience confirms that unlike freedom or truth, love drives, animates, moves. It is what prompted the cell phone calls on September 11, 2001, the handing

over of the human spirit looking for union. Not only does love look for union, it also moves us toward freedom and truth. Love then makes possible our search for a freedom for greater love and a truth to love rightly.

One of the most important works in moral theology in the twentieth century specifically turned to the tradition to confirm this truth from human experience. In *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*, Gérard Gilleman insists that we need an experience-based moral theology that starts at the depths of our being. He turned to charity, the love of God dwelling in us, and there he tapped into the notion of spiritual or devotional theology nourishing the depths of our spirit. When we think of charity, Gilleman quoted Thomas Aquinas as saying, we must realize that the love of God is no less than the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. Herein we find the love of God, charity animating us. Gilleman also invokes Thomas calling charity the mother of the virtues, again because it precedes all other virtues by animating them and giving them life.

Tradition constantly confirms this human experience of the love of God preceding all else. For instance, our tradition testifies, time and again, to the love of God as the foundation of the call to become a Christian. Of course, the paradigmatic conversion marked by love is Augustine's (354–430) own. Augustine, who converted to Christianity in his early thirties, insisted on the primacy of love—"Love and do as you will." He describes in the tenth book of the *Confessions* the deeply felt, passionate, visceral pursuit of the love of God:

Late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you! And, look, you were within me and I was outside, and there I sought for you and in my ugliness I plunged into the beauties that you have made. You were with me and I was not with you. Those outer beauties kept me far from you, yet if they had not been in you, they would not have existed at all. You called, you cried out, you shattered my deafness: you flashed, you shone, you scattered my blindness: you breathed perfume, and I drew in my breath and I pant for you: I tasted, and I am hungry and thirsty: you touched me, and I burned for your peace.

Augustine's conversion was a response to the love of God already within him. Similarly, the conversion of St. Paul, who also testified to the primacy of love, was a call of love. Of course, unlike Augustine, we do not have from Paul the description of his conversion in quite the poetry that Augustine provided, but for the great evangelizer who wanted nothing but Christ, certainly he understood Christ's call as nothing but love.

I first came to this insight not from the Letters of Paul—though it was always there—but in a painting by Caravaggio (1573–1610). To appreciate Caravaggio's painting, I want to compare it with an earlier one by Michelangelo (1475–1564).

In Michelangelo's *Conversion of St. Paul* (1542–1545), God, accompanied by angels and saints, erupts from heaven and parts the sky, allowing heaven's light to aim tornado-like on the person of Paul. God inter-

venes directly onto a plain, sending Paul's horse and at least fifteen soldiers away in flight. In the lower left-hand corner of the canvas, an elder, white-bearded, stunned Paul shields his face as he turns toward the light with his companion helping him to his feet. The painting is clearly about the power of God entering dramatically and definitively into human history.

In Caravaggio's *Conversion of Paul* (1600), there are only three figures, Paul, his horse, and Paul's companion tending to the horse. On a fairly dark background we see Paul young, in vibrant passionate colors of orange, red, blue, and yellow, wearing armor, very handsome on his back, legs opened, eyes closed. The conversion is an ecstatic moment in which Paul is purely recipient of God's love. It has a deeply erotic tone. The horse and his companion do not flee but remain standing there, neither aware of what is happening to Paul. Only Paul in his deep interiority is receiving the Lord. He is in union with the Lord. This deep, internalized conversion clearly conveys that God is doing something to Paul.

In this painting, unlike Michelangelo's, God is not visible. God is present, nonetheless, but in Paul, because someone is doing something to Paul. Caravaggio captures Paul's experience, making sure that the agent we see active is not Paul but God. Thus, even though you see God in Michelangelo's, still your eyes move to Paul. In Caravaggio's, you see Paul, but you look for God.

This move by Caravaggio is insightful. The event is not Paul being turned around. The event is Paul becoming deeply attuned to the presence of the love of God in

his life. Of course, only one who has known that experience could insist that love is the only thing that lasts.

The greatness of our tradition is that the love of God is not simply the beginning of the Christian's life but the whole continuum of it. Thus, in the Church of Maria del Popolo, Caravaggio's *Conversion of Paul* hangs in front of his *Crucifixion of Peter*. Like Paul, Peter is on his back, but his back is on a cross, and while the stimulated Paul is completely clothed, the aging flesh of Peter is fairly exposed, but hardly erotic. Peter is looking at his hands, fastened to the cross. He inevitably recalls the questioning on the beach—"Do you love me?"—and the prediction that Peter, when he is old, shall stretch forth his hands and be led where he will not want to go (John 21:15–19).

In two paintings, Caravaggio captures the beginning and the end of the Christian life as a life living out of the love of God.

For Reflection

1. When you hear the term *morality*, what do you think of? In what ways do these two readings present an understanding of Christian morality that is similar to or different from the view you have? Explain.
2. According to *The Church in the Modern World*, what is the purpose of freedom? Provide examples from the reading supporting your answer. How does this view of freedom coincide with and differ from the view of freedom presented in our society?
3. Why does James Keenan, SJ, in *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, decide to start with love rather than freedom in presenting Christian morality? Provide an explanation citing the reading.
4. In a library or online, find a copy of Caravaggio's *Conversion of Paul* and Michelangelo's *Conversion of St. Paul*. Write a paragraph explaining which one best matches your experience of God.

Endnotes

1. Cf. *Rom* 2:14–16.
2. Cf. *Rom* 1:32.

Understanding Truth and Sin

By his reason, man recognizes the voice of God which urges him “to do what is good and avoid what is evil.”¹ Everyone is obliged to follow this law, which makes itself heard in conscience and is fulfilled in the love of God and of neighbor. Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person. (CCC, no. 1706)

Introduction

The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor), promulgated by Pope John Paul II on August 6, 1993, is the Church’s most recent and comprehensive statement on moral theology. Appearing after the collapse of both the wall dividing East and West Berlin and Communism in the Soviet Union, *The Splendor of Truth* addressed a threat less tangible but perhaps more pervasive than Communism: moral relativism. Moral relativism is the position that there are no universal truths and objective moral standards, only different opinions. Its influence is everywhere, from ethical debates between friends (“Well, that is fine for you, but it is not what I believe.”) to discussions about the legitimacy of laws (“Who can say what is right? Everyone has to decide for herself.”).

The Splendor of Truth contrasts this moral relativism with truth. All human beings, it asserts, instinctively search for truth and meaning, which is found in the revelation of Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). We are gifted with freedom and conscience for the sake of discovering and living the truth. Freedom, from the Catholic perspective, is not license to do whatever one wants, but the gift and ability to choose the good; conscience is not merely the latitude to decide what one feels, but the power to determine what is truly right. The teaching of the Magisterium, through its interpretation of Scripture and Tradition, helps inform our freedom and conscience.

While *The Splendor of Truth* is best known for its unflinching assertion that some acts are always and everywhere wrong and therefore forbidden, it situates this claim within an understanding that a moral life is a response to Jesus’s invitation “Come, follow me.” The following excerpt, taken from the first chapter of *The Splendor of Truth*, is a meditation on the story of the rich young man from Saint Matthew’s Gospel (19:16–21). It portrays the moral life as a pilgrimage characterized not by the burden of obeying rules, but by the joy and fulfillment that comes with being a disciple of the Lord. While affirming that the Ten Commandments remain valid obligations, *The Splendor of Truth* invites us to recognize the duty to love God and neighbor as a way of returning the love God first showed for us.

obligation

a duty

Moral theology underwent an important change in the twentieth century. For a long time it was shaped by the practice of the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation; penitents had to avoid or confess sins and receive forgiveness so they could go to heaven. But *The Splendor of Truth* illustrates a shift in thinking. The rich young man said he had kept the commandments, yet asked what he still lacked. Likewise, moral theology has begun to focus not just on avoiding evil, but increasingly on *doing good*. What happens to the concept of sin when such a shift occurs?

In the second reading, Richard M. Gula, SS, offers an account of these developments and presents a vivid understanding of sin today. He explains that a relational model of the moral life, in which responsibility is the key characteristic, has supplanted the legalistic model wherein sin is akin to a crime. Gula then elaborates on the meaning of familiar types of sin—original, social, mortal, and venial—in this new framework. He concludes by reminding us that any serious assessment of sin leads us to a profound recognition of God’s mercy.

Excerpt from *The Splendor of Truth* (*Veritatis Splendor*)

by Pope John Paul II

Chapter I—“Teacher, What Good Must I Do . . . ?” (Mt 19:16)—**Christ and the answer to the question about morality**

“Someone came to him . . . ” (Mt 19:16)

6. *The dialogue of Jesus with the rich young man*, related in the nineteenth chapter of Saint Matthew’s Gospel, can serve as a useful guide *for listening once more* in a lively and direct way to his moral teaching: “Then someone came to him and said, ‘Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?’ And he said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He said to him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus said, ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ The young man said to him, ‘I have kept all these; what do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘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’” (Mt 19:16–21).

7. “*Then someone came to him . . .*” In the young man, whom Matthew’s Gospel does not name, we can recognize every person who, consciously or not, *approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality*. For the young man, the *question* is not so much about rules to be followed, but *about the full meaning of life*. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion. This question is ultimately an appeal to the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man’s life.

vocation

a calling to serve God; purpose in life

Church

the people of God; followers of Jesus across time and space

Precisely in this perspective the Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of moral theology, so that its teaching would display the lofty vocation which the faithful have received in Christ, the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart.

In order to make this “encounter” with Christ possible, God willed his Church. Indeed, the Church “wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life.”

“Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” (Mt 19:16)

8. The question which the rich young man puts to Jesus of Nazareth is one which rises from the depths of his heart. It is *an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every man*, for it is about the moral good which must be done, and about eternal life. The young man senses that there is a connection between moral good and the fulfilment of his own destiny. He is a devout Israelite, raised as it were in the shadow of the Law of the Lord. If he asks Jesus this question, we can presume that it is not because he is ignorant of the answer contained in the Law. It is more likely that the attractiveness of the person of Jesus had prompted within him new questions about moral good. He feels the need to draw near to the One who had

begun his preaching with this new and decisive proclamation: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15).

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. Christ is the Teacher, the Risen One who has life in himself and who is always present in his Church and in the world. It is he who opens up to the faithful the book of the Scriptures and, by fully revealing the Father’s will, teaches the truth about moral action. At the source and summit of the economy of salvation, as the Alpha and the Omega of human history (cf. Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13), Christ sheds light on man’s condition and his integral vocation. Consequently, “the man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, 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. If this profound process takes place within him, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deeper wonder at himself.”

If we therefore wish to go to the heart of the Gospel’s moral teaching and grasp its profound and unchanging content, we must carefully inquire into the meaning of the question asked by the rich young man in the Gospel and, even more, the meaning of Jesus’ reply, allowing ourselves to be guided by him. Jesus, as a patient and

sensitive teacher, answers the young man by taking him, as it were, by the hand, and leading him step by step to the full truth.

“There is only one who is good” (Mt 19:17)

9. Jesus says: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17). In the versions of the Evangelists Mark and Luke the question is phrased in this way: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mk 10:18; cf. Lk 18:19).

Before answering the question, Jesus wishes the young man to have a clear idea of why he asked his question. The “Good Teacher” points out to him—and to all of us—that the answer to the question, “What good must I do to have eternal life?” can only be found by turning one’s mind and heart to the “One” who is good: “No one is good but God alone” (Mk 10:18; cf. Lk 18:19). *Only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself.*

To ask about the good, in fact, ultimately means to turn towards God, the fullness of goodness. Jesus shows that the young man’s question is really a *religious question*, and that the goodness that attracts and at the same time obliges man has its source in God, and indeed is God himself. God alone is worthy of being loved “with all one’s heart, and with all one’s soul, and with all one’s mind” (Mt 22:37). He is the source of man’s happiness. Jesus brings the question about morally good action back to its religious foundations, to the acknowledgment of

God, who alone is goodness, fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness.

10. The Church, instructed by the Teacher's words, believes that man, made in the image of the Creator, redeemed by the Blood of Christ and made holy by the presence of the Holy Spirit, has as the *ultimate purpose of his life to live "for the praise of God's glory"* (cf. Eph 1:12), striving to make each of his actions reflect the splendour of that glory. "Know, then, O beautiful soul, that you are *the image of God*," writes Saint Ambrose. "Know that you are *the glory of God* (1 Cor 11:7). Hear how you are his glory. The Prophet says: *Your knowledge has become too wonderful for me* (cf. Ps. 138:6, Vulg.). That is to say, in my work your majesty has become more wonderful; in the counsels of men your wisdom is exalted. When I consider myself, such as I am known to you in my secret thoughts and deepest emotions, the mysteries of your knowledge are disclosed to me. Know then, O man, your greatness, and be vigilant."

What man is and what he must do becomes clear as soon as God reveals himself. The Decalogue is based on these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex 20:2–3). In the "ten words" of the Covenant with Israel, and in the whole Law, God makes himself known and acknowledged as the One who "alone is good"; the One who despite man's sin remains the "model" for moral action, in accordance with his

Decalogue

meaning "ten words"; another name for the Ten Commandments

covenant

a formal agreement between God and the people, with mutual responsibilities

command, “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy” (*Lev* 19:2); as the One who, faithful to his love for man, gives him his Law (cf. *Ex* 19:9–24 and 20:18–21)

in order to restore man’s original and peaceful harmony with the Creator and with all creation, and, what is more, to draw him into his divine love: “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (*Lev* 26:12).

The moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man. 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.”

Excerpts from “Understanding Sin Today”

by Richard M. Gula, SS

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six weeks since my last confession. I lost my patience three times; I lied twice; I missed Mass once; I had impure thoughts twice and I gossiped about my neighbor four times.”

Sound familiar? The above confession reflects an understanding of the moral life and sin that prevailed among Roman Catholics for centuries. But in the last half of this century, many changes have been occurring in the way we think about morality and sin. These changes have resulted in part from new ways of understanding what it means to be human. They also come from rediscovering old ideas that the Bible and Jesus taught about how we ought to relate to God and to one another.

Sin as crime

There was a time when Catholics thought that living morally was mostly a matter of obeying the law—the divine law or the commandments of God, the ecclesial (Church) laws or the natural laws expressed in the moral teaching of the Church. “It’s in the Bible” or “The Church says so” were often our most important reasons for being moral.

Sin was like a crime, a transgression of the law. It was akin to breaking the speed limit on the highway. The law

is what made an action sinful. Where there was no clear-cut law (no speed limit), there was no question of sin (go as fast as you want).

Catholic theology has since come to realize that the legal model for understanding the moral life and sin is deficient. For one thing, the demands of being a faithful follower of Jesus, of living according to the vision and values of the gospel, stretch us farther than what can be prescribed by law.

But no one is trying to do away with laws. We know that laws will always be necessary to help us live together well. Just as our city streets would be chaos without traffic laws, so our living together would be a moral chaos without laws like those about telling the truth, respecting property and protecting life.

But laws cannot possibly cover all the decisions that we have to make. The legal model of the moral life too easily makes moral living a matter of repeating the same old behaviors even though we—and our world—have changed. The legal model also tends to focus too much on the actions that we do as being sinful or not. Did I miss Mass? Did I cheat on an exam or on my taxes? Did I disobey my parents?

Laws by themselves don't address the important realities of the heart, such as our attitudes (Are we kind or hostile?), intentions (Do we strive to be helpful or self-serving?) and ways of seeing things (Do we look through the eyes of faith? Are we optimistic or pessimistic?). Jesus reminds us that what comes from the heart is what makes one sinful. Sinful actions are like the tip of an iceberg

being held above the surface by a wayward heart (see Is 29:13; Mk 7:21; Mt 23:25–26; Lk 6:45).

The legal model also tends to make the moral life too centered on one's self. Sin affects me and my salvation. Saving my soul through obedience is the guiding moral principle according to this model. This leaves out, however, the all-important relational dimensions of sin and conversion. As St. Paul teaches, no one lives for oneself (Rom 14:7). As the Body of Christ, we suffer together and rejoice together (1 Cor 12:26–27). Because we share a common world, we are part of a network of relationships that joins each of us in responsibility to others and to all of creation. We all know that we violate the ecological balance of nature when we put toxins into our air and water or throw hamburger foil wrappers out the car window. We violate our moral ecology when we create discord, dissension, fear, mistrust and alienation in the web of life's relationships.

conversion

a change of heart with the intention of following God more faithfully

Sin's new look

A new look at the moral life has been informed by the biblical renewal in the Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and society.

For example, the biblical renewal has given us covenant, heart and conversion—not law—as our primary moral concepts. Responsibility has replaced obligation

as the primary characteristic of the moral life. Shifts in philosophy have emphasized the dignity of persons and the value of sharing life in society. Together these shifts in theology and philosophy support a *relational* model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships.

What might a contemporary confession sound like that reflects the relational model of the moral life?

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six weeks since my last confession. I am a husband, a father of three teenage children, and I hold an executive position in a large computer firm.

“Over the past month I have allowed love to grow cold at home and in my work. At home, I have been inattentive to my wife and children as I allowed my new projects at work to consume most of my time and attention. I have spent more time at work and little time with the family. At work, I have selfishly neglected to disclose some data which my colleagues needed for a new project. I wanted to gain the glory. I have also failed to support a female colleague who was clearly being sexually harassed and I failed to confront those who were doing the harassing.

“I think a good penance for me, Father, would be to take the family on a picnic this week and to make a special effort to affirm my junior colleagues for the great work they have been doing.”

This penitent senses how he is affecting the quality of life and love in his primary relationships. He also knows what he can do to show conversion. His confession reflects contemporary theology's emphasis on responsibility to others over the traditional overemphasis on what is allowed or forbidden by law. Rather than focusing just on committing sinful acts, it shows that sin is also an omission, a failure to do what ought to be done.

Far from doing away with sin, contemporary theology admits that sin is very much with us and touches us more deeply than we realize. Greed, violence, corruption, poverty, hunger, sexism and oppression are too prevalent to ignore.

Sin is just as basic a term in our Christian vocabulary today as it has been in the past. Its root sense means to be disconnected from God through the failure to love. In sin, we simply don't bother about anyone outside ourselves. Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart—a refusal to care—before it shows itself in actions. Because loving God and loving our neighbor are all tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships. . . .

My favorite example of how this relational vision of sin and the moral life influenced another's behavior came from my five-year-old niece, Julia. She listened to a conversation I was having with her eight-year-old sister about what she was being taught in her preparation for first Penance. The lesson on sin was filled with stories of relationships and the difference between loving and unloving choices. The next day, when Julia came home from kindergarten, I asked her how her day was. She said, "I had a good day." When I asked her what made it good,

she said, “I had an opportunity to make a loving choice. Kenny forgot to bring a snack today, so I gave him one of my pretzels.”

Julia learned quite well that right moral living begins with caring for one another: paying attention to another’s needs and acting in a way that enhances another’s well-being. Sin, by contrast, turns in and sets oneself against another. Self-serving interests destroy the bonds of peace and justice that ought to sustain us.

Original sin didn’t go away

In an age when evils on a massive scale frequently make front-page news (wars, ethnic genocide, bombings, terrorism), theologians are trying to revive the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine tells us that there is more evil in the world than that which we cause ourselves. Consider the children being born in Rwanda or Bosnia today. They are affected and infected by the evil that surrounds them before they are ever able to make choices of their own.

Original sin is the face of sin which we recognize as the condition of evil into which we are all born. It is a condition of being human that makes us feel as if our freedom were bound by chains from the very beginning. We feel the effects of this evil in the pull towards selfishness which alienates us from our deeper selves, from others and from God. Because of original sin, we will always know struggle and tragedy as part of our life. . . .

Social sin—a life of its own

Social sin has been around as long as civilization, but it is a relatively new concept for Catholics. We have tended to focus exclusively on personal (actual) sin: lying, cheating, missing Mass. We have not paid sufficient attention to social structures and customs which hold such sinful practices in place. We are changing, however. One clear example of a rising social consciousness can be seen in Pope John Paul II's 1995 "Letter to Women." Here he publicly acknowledges sexism as a social sin and then goes on to apologize to women for the ways the Church has complied in denigrating women, misrepresenting them, reducing them to servitude and marginalizing them from society.

Social sin describes human-made structures when they offend human dignity by causing people to suffer oppression, exploitation or marginalization. These include educational systems, housing policies, tax structures, immigration policies, health-care systems, employment policies, a market economy. Once established, social structures and customs seem to take on a life of their own. The social sin of racism, for example, has continued and still continues long after slavery was abolished. For example, there remain obstacles to adequate education, to housing, to work, sometimes even to voting.

We learn to live in a world with these structures. We presume that the social customs which they hold in place are good, traditional customs. That is what makes social sin so difficult to recognize and to change. Yet the evil of sinful social structures abounds in all forms of

discrimination, racism and sexism; in the exploitation of migrant workers; in the illiteracy and homelessness of the poor; in the lack of basic health care for all; in the manipulation of consumers by the manufacturing practices, advertising, pricing policies and packaging of goods; and in many other practices which we continue to support more out of ignorance than meanness. Why does social sin prevail? Largely because we fail to name social evils and seek to correct them. . . .

When we become aware of structural evils, we should not be paralyzed by the guilt of self-condemnation, but moved to conversion. Conversion from social sin involves, at one level, changing our own lifestyle in ways that will help reform society. We cannot do everything to end the structures which support sexism, for example, but we can do some things, for instance, curbing our use of exclusive and insensitive language. We can influence others' attitudes through the ways we talk to and about one another. At another level, conversion from social sin involves examining existing regulations and practices, reforming those that offend human dignity.

Actual sin—we all know it

Another face of sin is personal sin. Our traditional way of distinguishing the degrees of gravity of personal sins is to call them *mortal* and *venial* sins.

Catholics traditionally have been taught that for sin to be mortal, three conditions have to be met: 1) serious matter; 2) sufficient reflection; 3) full consent of the will.