As there is a bitter zeal that leads us away from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal that leads us away from vices and leads to God and to eternal life. And it is in this zeal that the monks must train themselves with the most ardent love: let them outdo one another in honoring one another, let them put up with one another's physical and moral infirmities with supreme patience. . . . Let them love one another with brotherly affection. . . . Let them fear God in love. . . . Let them put nothing before Christ who is able to lead all to eternal life. (Chapter 72)

—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.*

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger *was elected Pope Benedict XVI on 19 April 2005.*

The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis splendor*[1]

• **Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger** •

"Christ is the *Logos* made flesh, that is, the fullness of creative reason itself, who speaks to us and opens our eyes to see anew, even in the darkness of a post-metaphysical era, the presence of a creative truth that lies at the foundation of being and that, with its language, also speaks within being."

What is the ultimate intention of the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*? Asking ourselves this question helps us to understand better the train of thought developed in the document. If I have rightly understood the Pope's intention, the original motive that prompted him to write the encyclical was precisely to retrieve and to restate the Second Vatican Council's moral message, which found expression above all in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. In order to understand both the core of the council's message and John Paul II's way of

[1]The text that follows was delivered orally and recorded; it was elaborated in its present written form by Msgr. Livio Melina. It presents a rapid survey of the theme that is intended only to offer brief snapshots, so to speak, which require further exploration. In this sense, the text is an invitation to specialists to render concrete the themes that are presented here only in broad outline.

Communio 32 (Summer 2005).

restating it, it is perhaps worth our while to refer to the situation of moral theology prior to the council, characterized as it was by the rationalism of the manualist tradition. In reality, that period was not without movements of theological renewal, such as those which led to the constitution on the liturgy, or to the re-thinking of ecclesiology, or again to a new interpretation of Revelation.

1. Sacred Scripture and moral theology

Currents of renewal were also present within moral theology, but they still awaited a full working-out and an authoritative expression. Generally speaking, the manualist tradition really was marked by a decided rationalism; because of this, Sacred Scripture retained only a very marginal function in the elaboration of moral theology. The latter was constructed substantially on the foundation of natural law and therefore in the form of a philosophical reflection based on the ancient Stoic tradition that had in large measure been appropriated by Christianity throughout its history.

At the same time, the development of these manuals was also determined by the practical need to form confessors and to give concrete answers to the questions that might arise in the context of confession. Hence, together with a certain naturalism reflecting a substantially philosophical reflection decorated here and there with biblical citations, the manuals strongly emphasized casuistry so that they could respond to the requirements of practice.

However, the atmosphere of the Scriptures was totally lacking, as was the reference to Christ, in whom man finds the truth and the way in person, and therefore also finds open the door to life, reconciliation with God and communion with him: entering into communion with Christ, who is at one and the same time a man present in my time and the Son of God, we can reconcile the concreteness of the passing moment with the eternal weight of our life. The older type of moral theology no longer allowed people to see the great message of liberation and freedom given to us in the encounter with Christ. Rather, it stressed above all the negative aspect of so many prohibitions, so many "no's." These are no doubt present in Catholic ethics, but they were no longer presented for what they really are: the concretization of a great "yes."

So the need for a profound renewal was felt, and this was certainly the idea of the constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: to return to a

substantially biblical and christological ethics, inspired by the encounter with Christ, an ethics conceived not as a series of precepts but as the event of an encounter, of a love that then also knows how to create corresponding actions. If this event happens—a living encounter with a living person who is Christ—and this encounter stirs up love, it is from love that everything else flows. To illustrate all this, to show the great biblical vision and thus to develop, from this starting point, the particular contents of ethics as well, was the program the council proposed to theologians.

Then something unexpected happened, perhaps not completely unforeseeable, but in any case unexpected. There were some initial attempts, which were certainly important and valid, to renew a moral theology under biblical inspiration, even if, naturally, not all the concrete contents of this theology could be obtained literally from the Sacred Scriptures, but rather need to be discovered within the horizon of the great biblical inspiration. These attempts quickly ceased, however, without attaining their goal, without arriving at the new springtime of a profoundly christological and biblical moral theology that had been so hoped for.

It is certainly worthwhile looking into the reasons for this failure, because it was not caused by ill will but rather was the consequence of real problems. A first very real problem was that, in Sacred Scripture, we do not find ready-made answers for the pressing and very grave problems of our era. It also seems difficult to develop from Sacred Scripture adequate responses to the challenges of our time.

Moreover, the awareness began to grow that, in order to be present in today's discussion and to have an impact on contemporary culture, we had to find a language that was adapted to today's world along with forms of argumentation that would be effective in the debate. Clearly, if we think of the discussion regarding cloning, artificial procreation, euthanasia, and so many other questions of bioethics, it is important genuinely to enter into the language and thought of the world community, which finds itself faced with these great problems. It is important to find arguments that can be understood by the modern mind and that are capable of convincing it. From this point of view, too, the Bible seemed too distant from the common way of thinking, unsuitable for public argumentation, and simply too peremptory for a debate that takes place on a human and philosophical level.

Beyond this, there was another issue that emerged from Scripture itself. As we well know, Scripture does not offer us a theological system, and still less a system of moral theology, with a systematic and orderly presentation of the main principles of action. To the contrary, Scripture is a path, a history, the multiple rereadings of which converge on Christ, who, for his part, cannot adequately be understood without re-tracing the path of all the narratives converging on his person. But how is it possible adequately to understand this path and to find, in the multiple rereadings that advance toward Christ, the permanent substance that can function as the principle of Christian action? Such a reconciliation of history and truth is always a difficult undertaking.

Another question was that the reading of Sacred Scripture played a role in the ecumenical debate, where it found a difficult situation. With regard to this, and without wishing to enter into the differences between the Calvinist and Lutheran visions, I would like to address above all the Lutheran perspective, although even the first is not, in the end, so different from it. According to Luther's conception, Sacred Scripture is to be interpreted in terms of the dialectic between law and Gospel, and even the Christian life must be understood precisely within this dialectic of opposites, of the God who is contrary to himself. Naturally, in this perspective, everything considered law falls onto the negative side of that dialectic, which is supposed to educate us in the Gospel and in reception of the radical forgiveness granted to us without our merits.

But once this dialectic between law and grace, and consequently the interior division of Sacred Scripture itself has been affirmed, a flood of questions emerge: "What is the law?" and "Is ethics a part of the law and thus of a reality that has been overcome by Christ, that no longer has value because it was only a pedagogy and a way of leading us to its opposite?" "Is the Decalogue, too, part of the law and is it perhaps precisely that law which has now been surpassed by the grace of the Gospel?" "And those works that cannot merit salvation for us, are they to be identified with our moral action? If this is the case, what is the point of our moral action? What theological dignity does it have? What link to the figure of Christ, if Christ is the Gospel while moral action is our work?" All this found a very radical expression in Luther, who, at least in a good part of his work, places even love on the level of works. For him, love, too, is our work, so much so that he could not accept the celebrated phrase of the letter to the Galatians (5:6): *fides caritate operans* [faith working in charity]. This seemed to be contrary to the principle of *sola fides*, which was intended to refute precisely the idea of faith that works through charity. But in this way, charity, too, becomes profane or at least problematic. What then is our moral action? What does the Bible say about ethics? In what sense does Christ inspire our moral action? It is true that Luther then adds, "Yes, faith bears fruit, and it is precisely in the fecundity of faith that the truth of faith is demonstrated." But what is the relationship between these "fruits of faith" and the "works" that do not merit? Does ethics have only profane relevance, or, to the contrary, can it be integrated into a christological vision? There is no denying that the problem becomes terribly complicated in the ecumenical debate, and that it therefore becomes difficult to take the Sacred Scriptures as the inspirational source and starting point for the construction of the foundations of moral vision.

The foregoing explains the vicissitudes of post-conciliar moral theology, which has led to a radical heterogeneity of ends: while it was hoped that a renewed moral theology would go beyond the natural law system in order to recover a deeper biblical inspiration, it was precisely moral theology that ended by marginalizing Sacred Scripture even more completely than the pre-conciliar manualist tradition. In the latter, in fact, Sacred Scripture was absent *de facto*, although perhaps in theory it was supposed to inspire, though without success. Now, on the other hand, it is marginalized *de iure*: it is claimed that Sacred Scripture cannot offer moral principles that would suitably guide the construction of our actions. Scripture, according to this position, offers only a horizon of intentions and motivations, but it does not enter into the moral contents of action. These contents are left to properly human rationality. We see here the reflection of the conception that, having instituted a dialectic between law and Gospel, understands moral action to be profane. Such a conception now translates into the claim that ethics is purely rational, so that, in order to open itself to universal communicability and to enter into the common debate of humanity, ethics ought to be constructed solely on the basis of reason. Various justifications are adopted for this new redimensioning of Scripture, which is no longer the starting point, the source of permanent inspiration, the fundamental criterion, but merely a horizon of meaning that does not influence the rigorously rational content of action. The accurate analysis of Sacred Scripture through the so-called historical-critical method is supposed to establish that

one cannot identify anything in it that is properly Christian or essentially and uniquely biblical. All the moral contents that appear in Sacred Scripture, according to this view, were taken over from the outside cultural context: they do not derive from Abrahamic faith or from Christian inspiration, but come from outside and were simply incorporated into Scripture. Moreover, one must consider the change of the different cultural contexts in which the biblical text originated.

Such widespread theses are, however, terribly superficial and absolutely untenable. Although it is true that Sacred Scripture does not intend to propose specific moral contents as the only ones and that it is in dialogue with human cultures in search of the most just action, none of this implies that there is nothing original about it. In fact, the originality of Sacred Scripture in the area of ethics does not consist in the exclusivity of the contents it starts from, but rather in the purification, discernment, and maturation of what was proposed by the surrounding culture. If we compare the moral proposals that served as the Bible's material and the contents expressed in the latter, we can observe that the specificity of Sacred Scripture's contribution to human morality lies precisely in this: the critical discernment of what is truly human because it assimilates us to God, and its purification from whatever is dehumanizing; its insertion into a new context of meaning, that of the Covenant, which raises the human and brings it to fulfillment. The true novelty and originality of Scripture is in the path of purification, illumination, and discernment. In this sense, the thesis of the non-originality of biblical ethics is clearly to be rejected. Its novelty, on the other hand, must be properly acknowledged: this consists in assimilating the human contribution, while transfiguring it in the divine light of Revelation, which culminates in Christ, thus offering us the authentic path of life. We must not forget that in its beginnings, Christianity was defined as *hodós*, a road, a way. Not a theory, but the response to the questions, "How do I live?" and "What do I do?"

Another line of argument had to do with the problem of the relation between history and enduring truth, and ultimately between the transcendental and categorical dimensions of ethics. The contribution of Sacred Scripture was held to lie in the transcendental and not in the categorical dimension. Without entering into detail, it seems to me that this distinction is misapplied and its meaning misunderstood. In fact, it cannot be applied to the issue of morality, because the questions "How do I live?" "How can I be a human being?" and "How do I respond to the deepest vocation of our being, that is, to the vocation to be like unto God?" cannot be reduced to a categorical question, which would involve mistakenly distinguishing between levels of knowledge that can function as guiding criteria for our actions.

This is, then, the first element that I wanted to draw out: the marginalization of Sacred Scripture on the part of moral theology, justified *de iure* in post-conciliar moral theology and not simply practiced *de facto*, as in the manualist tradition. Biblical texts may appear in important and rich areas within the treatment of moral theology, but their function, with regard to the constitution of moral action, is marginalized as a matter of principle.

2. *The conception of reason*

Another important point to consider is the profound change in the concept of reason. As has been mentioned above, philosophical rationality in the pre-conciliar era was developed with reference to the fundamental category of natural law. Now, on the other hand, discussion is occurring in a context that is not only post-metaphysical but also a-metaphysical, in which it seems that the natural law is part of a past that is gone without recovery. The concept of nature has undergone radical change. Whereas for the Stoics nature pointed to a divine reality of a pantheistic stripe, so that nature, full of gods and divinities, was saturated with signs of the divine will and of the path to divinization, in Christianity, through the concept of creation, nature became transparent to the intentions of the Creator: it expresses the language of the Creator, who lets himself be perceived through creation.

Today, however, both the Stoic and the Christian conceptions of creation have been obscured and for the most part replaced by a radical evolutionism, in which nature is no longer the expression of a creating reason, but of various causal and necessitating factors that contributed to producing the world in which we live. Consequently, the world no longer has any metaphysical transparency. Human reason has lost the capacity to see, in the world and in itself, the transparency of the divine. This a-metaphysical and post-metaphysical reason thus becomes a reason closed in on itself, in which the divine light does not appear. Alone and left to its own resources, it must find the paths to be taken, the actions to be

performed, and the decisions to be made. How could such a post-metaphysical reason construct a moral vision? Certainly no longer by recognizing moral principles inscribed in being, because nothing is inscribed if being is the product of evolution. And yet, reason must nonetheless find reference points for making fitting decisions for the life of the person and of the community and for the future of humanity.

In this way, consequentialist ethics was born, whether we call it teleologism or proportionalism. This view presupposes a post-metaphysical reason, deaf and blind to the divine word in being. It seeks the best way of constructing the world through the calculation of consequences. It identifies what must be done by using this criterion. Thus, it obviously changes the relationship between intention and object. In fact, the object of action is in itself mutable and must be placed in a context in order to mean anything. With the denial of the existence of principles inscribed in being, the possibility of recognizing the *intrinsece bonum aut malum* naturally also disappears. Nothing is *intrinsece bonum* or *intrinsece malum*, because everything depends on context and on the finalities that must be realized.

We have thus arrived at a theory that contradicts the very foundations of the Christian vision; the latter takes its starting point precisely from the language of the Creator, who then makes himself perceptible in a new and definitive way in the person of Christ.

The repercussions of these conceptions became visible above all with the debate following the publication of the encyclical *Humanae vitae*. This debate led to a denial of the authority of the magisterium in concrete questions of morality and to an absolutization of the subjective conscience liberated from the Church as its reference point.

3. *The profound intention of* Veritatis splendor

It was precisely to respond to this inversion of the Catholic vision, with regard both to the use of the Bible and to the definition of reason, that the Holy Father entered the fray with the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*. Considering the panorama we have just described, it seemed necessary to return to the Second Vatican Council. The paradox of the situation was that precisely the newfangled vision that proposed a new way of reading Sacred Scripture, or, to speak more frankly, of marginalizing it, as well as a new concept of reason, claimed to be the authentic heir and the concrete realization of the council. If we consider the texts and the fundamental intentions of Vatican II, however, it becomes clear that this was not at all the will of the council; to the contrary, this vision leads precisely to the position directly opposed to what the council had hoped for. But this means that, precisely within the new context in which we find ourselves, we must carry out the council's mandate, thinking afresh how it can be relevant today and reasonably plausible in our time. The great vision of the council demands to be rethought in its foundations, but also verified and renewed in the face of radical problems.

When I saw the way in which *Veritatis splendor* was received, my disappointment did not come so much from the fact that the encyclical gave rise to many criticisms (since I come from Germany, it is a normal thing to me that even papal documents are objects of criticism), but rather from the fact that people did not enter into this great debate about the principles of ethics, about this magnificent renewed vision that is at once christological and rational, because Christ is the *Logos*. Theologians did not want to enter into a debate about the challenge surrounding the vision of ethics as a whole, but limited themselves to a discussion of details; they defended themselves instead against the charge of consequentialism and accused the encyclical of being simplistic and of drawing caricatures. This kind of debate regarding technical details can also have a certain usefulness, but it is certainly not the right, necessary, and desired response to the challenge that *Veritatis splendor* proposes to moral theologians and that is ultimately a deepening of the Council's mandate. My hope would be that, ten years after its publication, the great challenge the encyclical poses to moral theology would finally begin to be confronted. I would like to say a few more words on this subject.

In the first place, as the Holy Father tells us, recognition of the centrality of the figure of Christ implies the true reconciliation between history and reason, between supernatural revelation and reason, because Christ is not just any historical personage who as such would be extraneous to human thought. Rather, Christ is the *Logos* made flesh, that is, the fullness of creative reason itself, who speaks to us and opens our eyes to see anew, even in the darkness of a post-metaphysical era, the presence of a creative truth that lies at the foundation of being and that, with its language, also speaks within being. Thus, the paths of history converge into unity in

Christ: he purifies and discerns everything history has expressed, and therefore shows us how history refers to truth, pointing us to the road that leads history precisely along the path that he himself is.

Secondly, I would like briefly to discuss the problem of autonomy, about which moral theologians spoke so much after Vatican Council II. In my opinion, this concept of autonomy, which Kant worked out consistently and systematically as an antithesis to the concept of heteronomy, has not been properly digested in the post-conciliar debates. This concept lost the depth and linearity of Kant's thought, even as it never managed to become integrated with the council's great christological vision.

But what is the correct conception of autonomy that fits with the Christian vision of man? The first certitude we must retain is that man did not create himself: he is a creature. He is not in himself the God who determines alone what the world is and what he must do in it. He is a creature who lives by virtue of a dependence which, thanks to the love of God, becomes participation: it is a union of love in love. If we wish to define love as dependence, we can say that the issue is dependence, but in reality love goes beyond this concept of dependence and reveals to us that it is precisely relationality that is the true form of participation in being itself and in its light. Therefore, living in communion with God and finding one's own path in the divine light, finding there the way, the truth, and the life, is not alienating to man; it is not heteronomy, but rather how he finds himself in his true identity. St. Augustine teaches us that God is *intimior intimo meo*, and that thus, obeying and uniting myself to God and to Christ, I do not leave myself to enter into heteronomy and an unacceptable dependence, a sort of slavery. To the contrary, precisely in this way I find my interiority and my identity, which until this moment remained locked up in sin. Through communion with Christ, I can find myself again and, entering into myself, I can find God and my *theosis*, my true essence, my true autonomy. Precisely in renouncing individualistic self-determination, I enter into the intimacy of my own being, through communion with Christ. This is how we become ourselves and, finding authentic communion with God, attain true freedom. In this sense, the concept of freedom, which is so central for Sacred Scripture and for the debate with modernity, must be read from within the christological vision of man, who is free not when he defends himself against God, but when he accepts the union with God offered to him in Christ. Human freedom is always a shared freedom, and only in the sharing of freedoms can the true freedom of each individual grow. The sharing of freedoms becomes possible in the opening of our freedom to the divine freedom.

Thirdly, we must rediscover the authentic meaning of conscience. In order to do this, we must overcome modern subjectivism. For modernity, the realm of religion and morality has been confined to the subjective sphere, since there is no trace of objective religion or morality in an evolutionistic conception; religion and morality are reduced to a complete subjectivism. Beyond the subject, no roads or further horizons open up. The ultimate competence of the subject, who cannot transcend himself and remains closed within himself, is thus expressed in a certain conception of conscience, according to which man is the measure of himself. As much as he might make use of aids and criteria outside himself, in reality his subjective conscience is what has the last and decisive word. The subject thus becomes really autonomous, but in a dark and terrible way, because he lacks the light that could really give his subjectivity value. This conception of the self-enclosed subject who is the ultimate criterion of judgment is overcome only in the classical concept of conscience, which expresses, on the contrary, the human being's openness to divine light, to the voice of the other, to the language of being, to the eternal *logos*, perceptible in the subject's very interior. It seems to me, then, that it is necessary to return to this vision of the human being as openness to the infinite, in whom the infinite light shines through and speaks.

4. The theological horizon of ethics

I would like to add yet another word: in this way, the christological horizon is truly a theological horizon. In fact, no ethics can be constructed without God. Even the Decalogue, which is without a doubt the moral axis of the Sacred Scriptures, and which is so important in intercultural debate, is not to be interpreted first of all as law, but rather as gift: it is Good News, and it can be understood fully in the perspective that culminates in Christ. Therefore, the Decalogue is not about precepts circumscribed in themselves, but is a dynamic that is open to an ever greater and deeper understanding. Moreover, the second tablet, despite its concreteness and its helpfulness in today's discussions, is not the only one that is important. We cannot prescind from the first tablet, either, for an adequate herme-

neutic of the Commandments. In the Sacred Scriptures, in fact, the entire Decalogue is considered to be the self-revelation of God. It always begins with the words, "I am Yahweh, your Lord," and, through the ten words, God reveals his countenance. In the end, the ten words are a concretization, an articulation of the single commandment of love. To this single commandment belongs also love for God and our worship of him, such that without this fundamental reference to God, the second tablet, too, would not work. I believe, then, that for moral theology, the aspect of reason is of the greatest importance. Precisely because Christianity as such, the Gospel and ethics in particular, wants to communicate itself and must be communicable, it demands to enter the common debate of humanity. But the existence of God, too, belongs precisely to this rational dimension. We cannot yield on this point: without God, all the rest would no longer have logical coherence.

Lastly, I would like to draw attention to the importance of the theme of martyrdom, treated in paragraph 90 of the encyclical. It is in martyrdom that the *sequela* of the crucified Christ is realized in the fullest degree. In martyrdom, it becomes clear that a good exists that is worth even dying for. In reality, a life that no longer recognizes a good that gives it value is no longer a true life. Hence, the affirmation of absolute commandments that prescribe what is *intrinsece malum* does not mean submitting oneself to the slavery of prohibitions. Rather, it means opening oneself up to life's great value, which is illuminated by the true good, that is, by the love of God himself. Through the whole of human history, the martyrs represent the true apology of man. They demonstrate that the human creature is not a failure on the part of the Creator, but that, even with all the negative aspects that have occurred throughout history, this creature really stands in the light of the Creator. In testimony unto death, we see the power of life and of divine love. Thus, it is precisely the martyrs who show us, at one and the same time, the path to understanding Christ and to understanding what it means to be human beings.—*Translated by Michelle K. Borras.* □

JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER was elected Pope Benedict XVI on 19 April 2005.

Originally published in Camminare nella luce: Prospettive della teologia morale a partire da *Veritatis splendor, ed. L. Melina and J. Noriega (Rome: PUL, 2004). Translated and published by permission.*