

A *Ressourcement* Encyclical: *Veritatis Splendor* and the Recovery of Christocentric Moral Theology

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Abstract: This article proposes that Pope John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* is a *ressourcement* encyclical that creatively retrieves insights from a movement to renew moral theology in a Christocentric mode which had flourished in the decades immediately preceding Vatican II but dissipated soon after the Council. Although most clearly expressed in its often-neglected first chapter, in fact *Veritatis Splendor*'s Christocentric vision permeates the entire encyclical, including those portions often presumed to be purely philosophical, and lends the encyclical an internal coherence frequently overlooked. Reading *Veritatis Splendor* as a work of *ressourcement* and attending to its first chapter as a constructive proposal for moral theology rather than a mere prologue to an analysis of disputed questions offers promising new pathways for receiving the encyclical three decades later.

IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP, A COMMON CRITIQUE OF JOHN PAUL II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* is that the encyclical embodies, or at least desires, a return to the tradition of the moral manuals that dominated Catholic moral theology prior to the Second Vatican Council. For example, in his history of twentieth-century Catholic moral theology, James Keenan describes *Veritatis Splendor* as "a contemporary expression of neo-manualism."¹ While acknowledging that the encyclical is "not a manual *per se*," Keenan maintains that it reflects key elements of a neo-manualist approach including a belief "that moral truth [is] found primarily in norms and principles."² Such an approach, he argues, stands in contrast to contemporary historicist approaches to moral theology, making the encyclical decidedly nostalgic. Joseph Selling laments that *Veritatis Splendor* merely "reiterated the theory of the moral textbooks with

¹ James F. Keenan, SJ, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (Continuum, 2010), 128.

² Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 128, 118.

regard to the primacy of behavior in ethical decision-making.”³ Similarly, James Bretzke argues that the encyclical “seems to be arguing strongly for a return to the *status quo ante* of the pre-Vatican II understanding of moral theology, rather than mapping a route to move with the challenges of the new millennium.”⁴

Supporters of the encyclical, on the other hand, have argued that *Veritatis Splendor* is innovative and forward-looking precisely because it rejects the legalistic casuistry of the manuals and promotes a renewed vision of the moral life inspired by and aligned with the desire of the Second Vatican Council. For example, Romanus Cessario declares that “*Veritatis Splendor* inaugurates a new moment for Catholic moral theology, one that officially brings a close to the period of casuistry.”⁵ Servais Pinckaers, too, begins his lengthy commentary on the encyclical by asserting that *Veritatis Splendor* “is far more innovative than first appears.”⁶ He suggests that this innovation is largely due to its eschewal of the morality of obligation espoused by the manuals and its desire to reconnect Christian morality to the Gospel and the person of Christ. Indeed, Pinckaers goes so far as to suggest that, in undertaking this project, the encyclical “launches a kind of discreet revolution in the concept of Christian morality, down to its very foundations.”⁷

Both narratives about the encyclical are oversimplified, however. *Veritatis Splendor* is neither a nostalgic return to the manuals nor a novel reframing of the moral life. Rather, I submit that the encyclical can be more profitably read as a work of *ressourcement*. Specifically,

³ Joseph A. Selling, *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 186.

⁴ James T. Bretzke, SJ, “Moral Theology and the Paradigm Shift of Vatican II,” in *Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, ed. Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (Oxford University Press, 2023), 418–431, at 425. See also Charles Curran, “*Veritatis Splendor*: A Revisionist Perspective,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp and James J. O’Keefe (Sheed & Ward, 1995), 224–243, at 230: “John Paul II understands morality primarily on the basis of a legal model. Such an approach, which characterized the manuals of moral theology in vogue until very recent times, sees morality primarily in terms of obedience to the law or the commandments of God.” See also Daniel J. Daly, *The Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 107: “A lasting vestige of the manuals has been the continued presence of a norm-centered moral theology in papal writings. *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II’s encyclical on moral theology, focuses more on the natural law, norms, and obedience than on virtue.”

⁵ Romanus Cessario, OP, “From Casuistry to Virtue-Ethics,” *Ethics & Medics* 19, no. 10 (1994): 1.

⁶ Servais Pinckaers, OP, “An Encyclical for the Future: *Veritatis Splendor*,” trans. Mary Thomas Noble, OP, in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, ed. J. A. DiNoia, OP, and Romanus Cessario, OP (Midwest Theological Forum, 1999), 11–12.

⁷ Pinckaers, “An Encyclical for the Future,” 12.

Veritatis Splendor succeeds in recovering the insights of a Christocentric renewal of moral theology that flourished in the decades immediately preceding the Council. In the mid-twentieth century, several prominent Catholic moral theologians sought to reorient the discipline around the person of Christ, moving away from the legalistic casuistry of the manuals. Figures such as Fritz Tillmann, Louis-Bertrand Gillon, and the early Bernard Häring emphasized discipleship and interior conformity to Christ as the foundation of the moral life. While this Christocentric renewal gained initial traction, it was largely eclipsed in the post-conciliar period. In what follows, I argue that *Veritatis Splendor* represents a significant retrieval of this earlier Christocentric impulse and thus offers a promising vision for the ongoing renewal of moral theology.

To this end, the article is divided into two main parts. The first section presents the case for reading *Veritatis Splendor* as a *ressourcement* encyclical. It begins by offering a brief survey of three moral theologians working before the Council who endeavored to renew moral theology along decidedly Christocentric lines. It then examines the sudden eclipse of this Christocentric renewal in the decades following the Council and concludes with an analysis of the opening chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*, highlighting the Christocentrism of John Paul II's encyclical and demonstrating its creative retrieval of, and continuity with, the pre-conciliar Christocentric renewal movement. In the second part of the essay, I consider two objections to the claim that *Veritatis Splendor* advances a genuinely Christocentric morality: first, the alleged subordination of its Christocentrism to a morality of law and obligation within chapter one and, second, the apparent methodological discontinuity between chapters one and two. In response to these concerns, the second section underscores John Paul II's insistence on Christ as the fulfillment of the moral law and demonstrates how his Christocentric vision informs at a fundamental, albeit less visible, level even the seemingly philosophical elements of the encyclical's second chapter.

CHRISTOCENTRISM AND THE RENEWAL OF MORAL THEOLOGY

The Pre-Conciliar Christocentric Renewal Movement

Most narratives of twentieth-century Catholic moral theology rightly highlight the hegemony of the moral manuals prior to the Second Vatican Council.⁸ Prefaced by theoretical treatments of law,

⁸ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 9–34; Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 254–279, 298–300; John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral*

human action, conscience, and sin, the heart of the manuals was their treatment of specific cases of conscience, typically organized around the precepts of the Decalogue. As handbooks designed to assist priests in the confessional, the manuals were intended to be practical aids in assessing the extent of the penitent's obligations under law, the gravity of particular sins, and the assignment of suitable penance. Contemporary critics of the manuals frequently decry their voluntaristic conception of moral obligation, their rationalistic and deductive approach to law, and their minimalist conception of the moral life as concerning merely the satisfaction of the most essential duties.⁹ Yet, even amid the predominance of the moral manuals, seeds of renewal were being sown during the decades preceding the Second Vatican Council as some moral theologians sought to escape the rationalistic and legalistic casuistry that dominated the discipline and instead organized their treatments of the moral life around more decidedly theological themes, including around the person of Christ.¹⁰ Although a comprehensive examination lies beyond the scope of this article, it is possible to get a sense of this movement for the renewal of moral theology by considering three moral theologians who sought to frame the moral life in explicitly Christocentric terms.¹¹

The figure most widely regarded as the pioneer of a Christocentric approach to ethics in the middle of the twentieth century is Fritz Tillmann (1874–1953), a German biblical scholar turned moral theologian who brought his significant scriptural expertise to bear in moral theology. In his four-volume *Handbuch der katholischen Sittenlehre* and the later, more popular *Der Meister Ruft*, Tillmann champions a vision of the moral life permeated by the themes of discipleship and the following of Christ.¹² So central to his thought are

Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition (Clarendon, 1987), 224–258; John A. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (Paulist, 1990), 29–122; Matthew Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Catholic Moral Theology* (Eerdmans, 2021), 50–124.

⁹ See Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 277–279; Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 29–30.

¹⁰ In addition to the examples of Christocentric renewal considered below, other noteworthy efforts to renew moral theology include Gérard Gilman, SJ, *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*, trans. William F. Ryan, SJ, and André Vachon, SJ (Newman Press, 1959 [1954]); Emile Mersch, SJ, *Morality and the Mystical Body*, trans. Daniel F. Ryan, SJ (P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1939 [1937]).

¹¹ For more thorough treatments of the pre-conciliar Christocentric renewal movement in moral theology, see Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism* (Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 14–36; Livio Melina, “Christ and the Dynamism of Action: Outlook and Overview of Christocentrism in Moral Theology,” *Communio* 28 (2001): 112–139.

¹² Although there is relatively recent scholarly literature on Tillmann, Keenan nevertheless describes Tillmann's work as a “breakthrough” for his scriptural

these ideas that Tillmann defines moral theology as “the scientific presentation of the following of Christ in individual and communal life.”¹³ Drawing deeply on Scripture, Tillmann develops a rich and textured portrait of Jesus, who stands as the fundamental norm of the moral life, model to imitate, and master to follow.

As Stuart Chalmers observes, “Tillmann frames discipleship and the imitation of Christ in the light of love and in the context of relationship.”¹⁴ He begins *Der Meister Ruft* with a reflection on Jesus’s invitation to the disciples, “Come, follow me” (Matt 4:19). Inspired by the personalist philosophy of Max Scheler, Tillmann explains that *to follow*

means to choose someone as a model and to form and transform one’s own life according to his example. The fundamental prerequisite is to find a person whom we wish to imitate, because it will be in his conception and manner of life that we recognize a great good, the ideal. Love of the ideal opens the way for this recognition. Only in the light of love does the model appear to us in all his unique Splendor. Because of the irresistible attraction he exerts, the determination to become like the idea grows in us. Hence to follow someone means to choose him as a model, because one has been captivated by love of him.¹⁵

For Tillmann, Jesus is not a mere historical figure or an abstract ideal. Rather, he is a living, personal model whom the disciple follows only because of an intimate encounter, a personal invitation, and the captivation of love.

Moreover, Tillmann insists that following Christ does not consist only in outward imitation but in an ontological transformation through which one becomes a child of God, conformed to the image of the Son.¹⁶ The sacrament of baptism thus features prominently in Tillmann’s work as the foundation of the moral life, for it not only demonstrates the gratuity of the invitation to follow Christ, but also bestows the spiritual resources necessary to embark on the path of discipleship and enjoins a new way of life upon those who form a new

orientation, turn to the virtues, and pastoral sense (*A Brief History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 69).

¹³ Fritz Tillmann, *Handbuch der katholischen Sittenlehre*, vol. 3: *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi* (Druck and L. Schwann, 1934), 5.

¹⁴ Stuart Patrick Chalmers, “Fritz Tillmann, Discipleship, and the Renewal of Moral Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2021): 367.

¹⁵ Fritz Tillmann, *The Master Calls: A Handbook of Christian Living*, trans. Gregory J. Roettger, OSB (Helicon, 1960), 3. This is, as far as I am aware, the only work of Tillmann’s moral theology translated into English.

¹⁶ Tillmann, *The Master Calls*, 4–5.

creation.¹⁷ Tillmann's moral theology is marked by a dynamism of growth and progress. He stresses that the Christian's assimilation to Christ begins with baptism but is oriented toward subsequent advancement as one matures as Jesus's disciple. Tillmann's moral theology therefore does not foreground categories of obligation as if these were the hallmark of the disciple. Such an approach would be too static and inconsistent with Scripture's attestation to the organic abiding and mutual indwelling of Christ in the disciple. Instead, Tillmann notes that "Christ very fundamentally and decisively shifts attention from the external action to its origin" in one's interior dispositions, and he consequently adopts the language of virtue not only to highlight the salient features of Christ's person and action but also to underscore the inherently developmental character of following Jesus.¹⁸

Tillmann's ethic of discipleship is clearly an ethic of Christian perfection. In contrast to the minimalism of the manuals, which trade on the distinction between precepts and counsels as an essential feature of moral theology, Tillmann stresses the universality of Christ's summons to discipleship:

Christian perfection is the duty of every one of Christ's followers. No distinctions are made; it is not just the goal of a few especially endowed Christians . . . [Jesus] clearly indicates its universal character and its obligatory force for all. Perfection applies to the whole of the Christian life and hence is based on the fundamental relationship of the child of God to his Father in heaven.¹⁹

Tillman understands this universal call to holiness to be rooted in baptism, for the pursuit of Christian perfection is simply the unfolding of the identity of the children of God. Tillmann has rightly been hailed as a "true innovator" for his efforts to reframe moral theology not as the acceptance of a set of abstract ethical principles but rather as the following of Christ, "the absolute personality," so that "whoever professes to be a follower of [Christ] . . . must therefore also be of the same mind as he was, and act as he acted, and do what he demanded."²⁰

Tillmann's influence is readily perceptible in the work of a second figure, the French Dominican Louis-Bertrand Gillon (1901–1987), whose 1961 book *Cristo e la teologia morale* aims to complement the dominant "Alphonsian" approach of the moral manuals with a

¹⁷ Tillmann, *The Master Calls*, 15–23.

¹⁸ Tillmann, *The Master Calls*, 36.

¹⁹ Tillmann, *The Master Calls*, 45.

²⁰ Tillmann, *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi*, 12.

Thomistic approach emphasizing the beatific vision as the ultimate end of human life and the role of distinctly theological accounts of virtue, sin, law, and grace in the pursuit of that end. Most significantly, however, Gillon argues for the centrality of Christ in moral theology. Citing Tillmann, Gillon argues that

the moral life is the consequence of a “decision,” of a total choice, by which a personal subject takes up a position with regard to another person. . . . Either the subject decides to take this other person as model and as pattern of his own life, willing in that case to become a disciple, to “follow” in all things the person who makes an urgent appeal to him: come, follow me; or, on the contrary the subject remains in an attitude of refusal, it rejects the call that is made to him.²¹

For Gillon, the moral life is centered around a personal model and in the case of Christian ethics, that exemplar is none other than Christ. He recognizes that this requires a reframing of moral theology, arguing that it is necessary to “do away with that mass of casuistical solutions, with theoretical considerations, which lead the faithful to think that their moral existence is governed by quite another principle than the only valid one: *esse in Christo Jesu*.”²² To be clear, Gillon does not argue for the abrogation of moral norms nor does he think that moral theology should cease to reflect on practical questions. Rather, he argues these matters need to be integrated within a broader theological context. He explains that “the moral teaching of ‘personal exemplarity’ does not claim to suppress the norms of morality, moral and juridical laws. But these are abstract and general in character. They are meant to be placed and understood in the context of the personal exemplar which gives to them concrete vitality: the *Vorbild* [person-model] gives to the norms the life they lack.”²³ Gillon maintains that in Christ, the person-model of the Christian life, the precepts of the moral law cease to be impersonal abstractions but become the lived response to Christ’s personal invitation to follow him.

Although Gillon deploys the vocabulary of Scheler’s personalist philosophy and its theological appropriation by Tillmann when he develops his account of exemplarism, the burden of Gillon’s project is to demonstrate that such an approach is deeply resonant with the Thomistic tradition of moral theology. Against the common complaint that Christ is absent from Aquinas’s moral theology, Gillon insists that “Christ is everywhere present in the moral theology of St. Thomas,

²¹ Louis Bertrand Gillon, OP, *Christ and Moral Theology*, trans. Cornelius Williams, OP (Alba House, 1967), 13.

²² Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 23–24.

²³ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 14–15.

because the sacred humanity of Christ and the mysteries of his life exercise a universal instrumental causality on each and every one of the structures of the supernatural life.”²⁴ This Christological mediation produces in human beings their adoption as children of God and their reception of the infused virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Aquinas’s scholastic understanding of *sacra doctrina* as a unified whole enables him to integrate moral theology and Christology seamlessly. Gillon aims to advance that integration by more explicitly highlighting Christ’s role as the fundamental and personal norm of the moral life and more clearly casting the Christian moral life as the imitation of Christ.

A third figure who, at least early in his career, aimed to emphasize more vigorously the centrality of Christ for the moral life was the Redemptorist Bernard Häring (1912–1998), whose 3-volume *Das Gesetz Christi* was first published in 1954.²⁵ According to John Gallagher, with the publication of this early work “a process was set in motion that would result in the gradual removal of the neo-Thomist manuals of moral theology from the seminaries of Europe and the United States.”²⁶ Although the book’s basic structure still conforms to that of the manuals, *The Law of Christ* aims to reorient traditional categories of moral theology around Christ as the center of the moral life. Moreover, Häring, whose doctoral dissertation focused on the thought of Max Scheler and Rudolf Otto, consistently deploys personalist philosophical categories, often in place of more traditional scholastic terminology.²⁷

In this vein, *The Law of Christ* opens with the bold declaration that “the principle, the norm, the center, and the goal of Christian Moral Theology is Christ.”²⁸ This claim, formulated in language similar to Tillmann’s, provides the framework for the rest of Häring’s program and constitutes a notable departure from the methodology of the manuals. Rather than grounding his moral doctrine on philosophical principles about human nature, Häring insists that Christology rather than anthropology is the proper starting point for moral theology:

²⁴ Gillon, *Christ and Moral Theology*, 139.

²⁵ I emphasize Häring’s early work as a contribution to this renewal movement because there is a notable shift in his perspective and approach after Vatican II. For example, his 1978 trilogy *Free and Faithful in Christ*, despite its title, lacks the robust Christocentrism that characterizes his earlier work and opts instead for an approach to moral theology centered on the interplay of freedom and conscience. Indeed, some have even criticized *The Law of Christ* as excessively conscience-centered. See Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 174–184.

²⁶ Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future*, 169.

²⁷ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 174–176.

²⁸ Bernard Häring, CSsR, *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, vol. 1, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, CPPS (Newman, 1966), vii.

Christ stands before us as the perfect man, fully spiritual and devoted to the Father, entirely human and open to His brethren, to all the joys and sorrows of the world, absorbed in the majesty of the Father and filled with wonder over the lilies of the field. He also calls to us with all our powers. He appeals to all that is in man: intellect and will, heart and spirit. Christ who lives on in history, Christ who is the Church mystically does the same. . . . There is no surer way to the full perfection of the whole man than the perfect following of Christ in the communal life of the church.²⁹

Although he does not include any lengthy treatment of Christology proper, the primacy of Christ informs Häring's presentation of the human person as one called by Christ and whose life and actions constitute a response to that invitation. *The Law of Christ* still includes treatments of traditional moral categories typical of the manuals like freedom, conscience, human action, and sin. At the same time, these categories are often couched in the language of personalism rather than scholasticism, and they are integrated into a larger vision of the moral life as the human response to the invitation offered in Christ. Hence, conversion toward Christ and growth in likeness to Christ through the theological and cardinal virtues provide the culmination of Häring's treatment of general moral theology. Moreover, Häring attempts to reconfigure even these moral categories around the person of Christ as the focal point of moral theology. Thus, he describes the virtues as those traits of character "which make us like to Christ" and the moral law as "those limits beyond which our conduct becomes a contradiction to the life in Christ and a hazard to the imitation of Christ."³⁰ In short, for Häring in *The Law of Christ*, moral theology is quite simply "the doctrine of the imitation of Christ," and the theoretical elaboration of any other moral categories is at the service of elucidating this fundamental truth.³¹

Taken together, the work of Tillmann, Gillon, and the early Häring helpfully illustrates the main contours of the trend toward a more Christocentric moral theology during the decades that preceded the Second Vatican Council. They reflect a decidedly different methodological approach than the casuistry of the manuals. Indeed, they are, to quote the Council's own desiderata for moral theology as articulated in *Optatam Totius*, "renewed through a more living contact with the mystery of Christ," they were "deeply nourished by Sacred Scripture," and "shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world" (no. 16).

²⁹ Häring, *The Law of Christ*, 72.

³⁰ Häring, *The Law of Christ*, viii.

³¹ Häring, *The Law of Christ*, 61.

The Postconciliar Eclipse of Christocentric Moral Theology

Nevertheless, this enthusiasm for Christocentric moral theology did not have staying power in mainstream post-conciliar moral theology. In the years immediately following the Council, there was still an eagerness to emphasize the centrality of Christ for moral theology. For example, in a lengthy 1966 article entitled “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” Josef Fuchs takes *Optatam Totius* to be the charter for moral theology’s renewal, and in elaborating its vision, he reiterates themes central to the Christocentric renewal of the preceding decades. He argues, for instance, that the “Christian life is misconceived if it is not seen as an imitation of the example of Christ,” and he adopts Tillmann’s category of discipleship as the most fitting description of the moral life.³² Moreover, for Fuchs, as for his teacher Häring, Christology has important implications for anthropology, and thus the starting point for Christian ethics is not “man in the raw” but rather “Christian man . . . man, called by God ‘in Christ.’”³³ As a result, Fuchs underscores the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, insisting that “we are not meant to live merely as man, but as man baptized into Christ, into his death and into his resurrection.”³⁴

Only a few years later, however, one can detect a shift in Fuchs’s approach both to the interpretation of the conciliar call for renewal and the most adequate approach to moral theology itself. In a 1970 article on “conciliar morality,” Fuchs submits that

It would be a grave mistake to think that *Optatam Totius* was the last or only word on the subject of the renewal of moral theology. The Council was not satisfied to adopt the Christocentric approach in moral theology and leave it at that. In the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, it had already begun to advance toward a position *vis-à-vis* problems that were facing the Council then and in which we are engaged today. Thus, in *Gaudium et spes*—though in a preliminary and fragmented fashion—the Council began to grapple with questions that have become most important to Christians living in the world.³⁵

³² Josef Fuchs, SJ, “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” in *Human Values and Christian Morality* (Georgetown University Press, 1983), 1–55 [original: “Theologia moralis perficienda; votum Concilii Vaticani II,” *Periodica de re morali, canonica, liturgica* 55 (1966): 499–548].

³³ Fuchs, SJ, “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” 8.

³⁴ Fuchs, SJ, “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” 5.

³⁵ Josef Fuchs, SJ, “Vocation and Hope: Conciliar Orientations for a Christian Morality,” in *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality* (Georgetown University Press, 1983), 32–49 [original: “Vocazione e Speranza: indicazioni conciliari per una morale cristiana,” *Seminarium* 23 NS 11 (1971): 491–510]. One can detect a developmental shift in Fuchs’s thought on these issues between 1965 and 1971. For an intermediate position between the two articles cited here, see his 1967 address

As Fuchs's remarks suggest, the reception of *Gaudium et Spes* would become a significant factor in the development of post-conciliar moral theology. While the history of the document's composition and reception is too circuitous to rehearse in detail, it suffices to say that *Gaudium et Spes* is a complex document which has been read through various theological lenses, and different aspects of the document itself lend textual support to each of these interpretations.³⁶

Some theologians—especially those associated with the journal *Communio*—adopted a strongly Christocentric reading of *Gaudium et Spes* based on its assertion that “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (no. 22). This interpretation did not exert a significant influence among mainstream moral theologians, however. They tended instead to highlight the anthropological and social-ethical dimensions of *Gaudium et Spes* as the most essential ingredients for the renewal of moral theology and often downplayed the document's Christocentric thrust, either by ignoring or subordinating it to the document's anthropological claims. On this view, the pastoral constitution's significance consists primarily in its articulation of an anthropology rooted in human dignity, relationality, freedom, and conscience, its respect for the “autonomy of earthly affairs,” and its summons to a robust engagement with the world characterized by attending to the “urgent needs characterizing the present age . . . in the light of the Gospel and of human experience” (nos. 36, 46).

Inspired by this reading of *Gaudium et Spes*, many moral theologians aimed to articulate Christian ethics in a manner that could engage cooperatively and constructively with non-Christian modes of ethical thinking in order to address the myriad problems confronting the modern world. This desire for dialogue, collaboration, and common ground encouraged moral theologians to abandon strategies that seemed excessively particular to instead promote approaches rationally accessible and universalizable. Among other things, this entailed a marginalization of the person of Christ in moral theology. Thus, Livio Melina laments that in the dominant strains of moral theology, the Christocentric renewal that characterized the immediate pre-conciliar period was “succeeded . . . by drastic calls to abandon

published as “The Christian Morality of Vatican II,” in *Human Values and Christian Morality*, 56–75.

³⁶ On the drafting and reception of *Gaudium et Spes*, see Joseph A. Komonchak, “Le valutazioni sulla *Gaudium et Spes*: Chenu, Dossetti, Ratzinger,” in *Volti di fine concilio: Studi di storia e teologia sulla conclusion del Vaticano II*, ed. Joseph Dore and Alberto Melloni (Il Mulino, 2000), 115–153; Brandon Peterson, “Critical Voices: The Reactions of Rahner and Ratzinger to ‘Schema XIII’ (*Gaudium et Spes*),” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 1 (2015): 1–26.

this road in light of the demands of rational autonomy and the universality of ethics.”³⁷

The Swiss moral theologian Franz Böckle exemplifies this abandonment of a Christocentric perspective in a 1977 book when he suggests that the Christocentric renewal movement preceding the Council ultimately failed because “it soon became clear . . . that it would not be possible to formulate a universally valid normative theory on the basis of such slogans as the ‘imitation of Christ,’ the ‘kingdom of God,’ or ‘sacramental conformity with Christ.’ It also emerged quite soon from Karl Barth’s idea of Christological concentration that the figure of Christ as the *Universale Concretum* had to be in opposition to a normative generalization.”³⁸ Given the desire for a universally accessible ethic that could promote dialogue and cooperation in addressing contemporary social issues, Böckle maintains that grounding moral theology in the person of Christ is a non-starter.

Böckle’s position is representative of the 1970s movement in moral theology known as autonomous ethics—a position most notably espoused by Fuchs, Alfons Auer, and Bruno Schüller—in which “emphasis is . . . not on the specific morality of Christians but on the common morality of all people.”³⁹ Although there exist a variety of perspectives within this school, proponents of autonomous ethics generally agree there is no substantive difference, at least in terms of material content, between Christian morality and human morality.⁴⁰ Fuchs is representative of this position when he submits that “the principles and commands of moral conduct are the same for a truly human morality as for Christian morality.”⁴¹ These principles and commands, he argues, are accessible to human reason. The Gospel neither adds to nor detracts from the precepts of the natural law. According to Fuchs, the unique claims of Christian theology only enter moral analysis at the level of transcendental motivation and intentionality rather than at the level of categorical conduct.⁴² Although some moral theologians, known as the *Glaubensethik* school, responded to this movement toward autonomy by developing

³⁷ Livio Melina, “Christ and the Dynamism of Action,” 113.

³⁸ Franz Böckle, *Fundamental Moral Theology*, trans. N. D. Smith (Pueblo, 1980), 3–4. [Original: *Fundamentalmoral* (Kösel, 1977).]

³⁹ MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 38.

⁴⁰ MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 37–54; Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, CSSp, *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition Since Vatican II* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 101–134.

⁴¹ Josef Fuchs, SJ, “Human, Humanist, and Christian Morality,” in *Human Values and Christian Ethics*, 121–122.

⁴² Josef Fuchs, SJ, “Is There a Normative Non-Christian Morality?,” in *Personal Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 76.

a distinctively theological account of morality rooted in a Christocentric faith, these efforts had a relatively modest influence in mainstream academic moral theology.⁴³ Thus, the Christocentric impulse in moral theology, although not entirely stifled, was nonetheless marginalized in the decades after Vatican II.

Veritatis Splendor and the Recovery of Christocentric Morality

The extent to which the Christocentric impulse was eclipsed is perhaps most evident when one considers the initial reception of *Veritatis Splendor*. In the earliest analyses of the encyclical, nearly all the attention of Catholic moral theologians—critics and supporters alike—was trained on what Richard McCormick described as “its key second chapter.”⁴⁴ Revisionists focused on responding to and critiquing its treatments of issues like fundamental option and proportionalism.⁴⁵ At the same time, many supporters of the encyclical dedicated their energy to buttressing the pope’s teaching on intrinsically evil actions, demonstrating the flaws of proportionalist reasoning, and advocating magisterial intervention against dissent.⁴⁶

An unfortunate consequence of the overwhelming amount of scholarly attention devoted to the controversial material in the second chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* is the comparative neglect of its first

⁴³ See Heinz Schürmann, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, trans. Graham Harrison (Ignatius, 1986 [1975]); Carlo Caffara, *Living in Christ: Fundamental Principles of Catholic Moral Teaching*, trans. Christopher Ruff (Ignatius, 1987 [1981]). For a helpful overview of the *Glaubensethik* approach, see MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, 55–66.

⁴⁴ Richard A. McCormick, SJ, “Killing the Patient,” in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, ed. John Wilkins (Pilgrim, 1994), 17. For early reviews of the literature on *Veritatis Splendor*, see Richard A. McCormick, SJ, “Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Theological Studies* 55, no. 3 (1994): 481–506; Raphael Gallagher, “The Reception of *Veritatis Splendor* within the Theological Community,” *Studia Moralia* 33 (1995): 415–435.

⁴⁵ Charles E. Curran, “*Veritatis Splendor*: A Revisionist Perspective,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, 224–243; Bernard Häring, “A Distrust that Wounds,” in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 9–13; Joseph Selling, “The Context and Arguments of *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *The Splendor of Accuracy: An Examination of the Assertions Made by Veritatis Splendor*, ed. Joseph Selling and Jan Jans (Eerdmans, 1994), 22–70.

⁴⁶ German Grisez, “Revelation and Dissent,” in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 1–8; Martin Rhonheimer, “Intrinsically Evil Acts and the Moral Viewpoint: Clarifying a Central Teaching of *Veritatis Splendor*,” *The Thomist* 55 (1994): 481–506; William E. May, “John Paul II, Moral Theology, and Moral Theologians,” in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 211–239. More recently, see John Finnis, “Grounds and Preparations for the Main Thesis of *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 51, no. 2 (2015): 7–26.

chapter.⁴⁷ Moral theologians typically offered a few passing words of praise for the opening chapter before quickly moving on to a careful examination of chapter two. For example, although critical of the encyclical's second chapter, McCormick declares that "all Catholic moral theologians should and will welcome the beautiful Christ-centered presentation unfolded in chapter one," but he devotes no further analysis to that presentation.⁴⁸ Despite positioning himself as a staunch supporter of the encyclical, Germain Grisez treats the first chapter perhaps even more dismissively when he asserts that "while the encyclical's first chapter provides an inspiring articulation of the Gospel's teaching about following Jesus, its second chapter takes up and criticizes four ways in which various dissenters have tried to soften received moral teaching about intrinsically evil acts."⁴⁹ Grisez's words suggest that he views the opening chapter as a mere (inspiring) prologue to the real substance of the encyclical contained in chapter two.

A minority of theologians, however, did recognize the significance of the encyclical's first chapter. For example, Pinckaers argues that, while chapter two fulfills a much-needed polemical purpose, "the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* is every bit as important as the second, because it traces the broad lines of a renewal of Catholic moral theology through a return to its chief source—the Gospel—which means bridging the gap which has been created between morality and spirituality."⁵⁰ Indeed, he maintains that the first chapter is a truly "constructive" exercise in moral theology. Pinckaers connects the constructive project in chapter one to the Council's call for the renewal of moral theology and argues that John Paul II undertakes this work of renewal specifically through "the reestablishment of a profound and sustained contact with that primary source of inspiration for Christian life and theology that is the Word and Person of Christ."⁵¹

⁴⁷ One might argue that there exists an even more profound neglect of chapter three, and indeed this chapter will remain largely beyond the purview of the present article. For analysis of this chapter, see John Berkman, "Truth and Martyrdom: The Structure of Discipleship in *Veritatis Splendor*," *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994): 533–541.

⁴⁸ McCormick, "Killing the Patient," 17.

⁴⁹ Grisez, "Revelation and Dissent," 3.

⁵⁰ Pinckaers, "An Encyclical for the Future," 19. See also Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (The Catholic University of America Press, 2001); Patrick M. Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 54–82; Ryan Connors, "The Incarnate Word in Catholic Moral Theology: The Christocentric Visions of John Paul II and Robert Imbelli," in *The Center is Jesus Christ Himself: Essays on Revelation, Salvation, and Evangelization in Honor of Robert P. Imbelli*, ed. Andrew Meszaros (The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 189–204.

⁵¹ Pinckaers, "An Encyclical for the Future," 13.

The Christocentrism of *Veritatis Splendor* is evident from the very beginning of the encyclical. The opening line's reference to the "Splendor of truth," which "shines forth in the works of the Creator" and "enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom," establishes light as the driving image of the introduction (no. 1). This sets the stage for John Paul II's affirmation that "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' (John 1:14)" (no. 2). He then applies this bold Christological claim to the situation of contemporary human beings, insisting that

The decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself, as the Second Vatican Council recalls: "In fact, *it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man*. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of the future man, namely of Christ the Lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love" (no. 2).⁵²

Consequently, John Paul II proposes that the encounter with Christ offers a new perspective on the moral life. He urges Christians "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. . . . It is he who . . . by fully revealing the Father's will, teaches the truth about moral action" (no. 8). As the one who most fully reveals humanity to itself, Jesus is the consummate teacher of what is good for human beings.

John Paul II cautions, however, that to learn from Jesus about the human good is "not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment" (no. 19)—a point

⁵² The quote refers to *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22, which is instructive, for it both situates the encyclical as a response to the Council's call for the renewal of moral theology—a call to which he explicitly connects *Veritatis Splendor* in subsequent paragraphs—and proposes that a Christological hermeneutic is the appropriate method for pursuing that renewal. For a critique of John Paul II's use of *Gaudium et Spes*, see Mary Elsbernd, "The Reinterpretation of *Gaudium et Spes* in *Veritatis Splendor*," *Horizons* 29, no. 2 (2002): 225–239. Elsbernd argues that John Paul II's consistent citation of *Gaudium et Spes* does not *ipso facto* indicate theological continuity and in fact argues that in *Veritatis Splendor* "the theological anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes* has been recast in a dualistic and individualistic concept" and "re-contextualized *Gaudium et Spes* quotations on change, conscience, dialogue with modern culture, human autonomy, and social institutions by placing them into paragraphs stressing law and precepts" (226). However, Elsbernd operates out of a presumption that the "signs of the times" reading of *Gaudium et Spes* is the only legitimate interpretation of the document and gives no consideration to the type of Christocentric reading John Paul II espouses.

to which we shall return in the next section. “More radically,” the pope insists, “it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus” (no. 19). This is demonstrated most clearly when, “conscious of the young man’s yearning for something greater, which would transcend a legalistic interpretation of the commandments, the Good Teacher invites him to enter upon the path of perfection” (no. 16). That path of perfection entails the radical and bracing call of Jesus to “come, follow me” (Matt 19:21). For John Paul II, this is the very heart of Christian ethics. Indeed, he asserts that “following Christ is . . . the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality” (no. 19).

For John Paul II, holding fast to the person of Christ involves both outward imitation and interior conformity. He posits that “Jesus’s way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts, constitute the moral rule of the Christian life” (no. 20). Nevertheless, such a claim faces challenges with respect to discerning precisely what features of Jesus’s life are most central and therefore worthy of imitation. Therefore, John Paul II offers an interpretive key to guide this process: “[Jesus’s] actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him” (no. 20). To imitate Jesus is thus not just to replicate this or that particular action but primarily to embody his self-giving love. The pope emphasizes the point: “As he calls the young man to follow him along the way of perfection, Jesus asks him to be perfect in the command of love, in “his” commandment: to become part of the unfolding of his complete giving, to imitate and rekindle the very love of the ‘Good’ Teacher, the one who loved ‘to the end’” (no. 20). Although the pope employs the language of a commandment of love, this is not a precept that can be exhaustively codified. Rather, his point is that the law of love is Jesus himself in his very person. “*He himself becomes a living and personal law,*” the pope explains, “who invites people to follow him; through the Spirit, he gives the grace to share his own life and love and provides the strength to bear witness to that love in personal choices and actions” (no. 15).

At the same time, John Paul II asserts that “following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross” (no. 21). The capacity to live like Christ morally depends on having first been likened to him ontologically. By grace (especially the grace of baptism), the human person is conformed to the pattern of Christ and made a member of his Body and sharer in his power. The emphasis on interior conformity to Christ, an assimilation that occurs at the very core of the person and not merely a process of reprogramming one’s habits, underscores the necessity of grace for the moral life. “To

imitate and live out the love of Christ is not possible for man by his own strength alone,” John Paul II writes. “He becomes capable of this love only by virtue of a gift received” (no. 22).

Near the end of chapter one, John Paul II neatly summarizes his Christocentric vision of the moral life and reasserts the enduring relevance of this encounter for the present moment: “Jesus’s conversation with the rich young man continues, in a sense, in every period of history, including our own. The question: ‘Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?’ arises in the heart of every individual, and it is Christ alone who is capable of giving the full and definitive answer. The Teacher who expounds God’s commandments, who invites others to follow him and gives the grace for a new life, is always present and at work in our midst” (no. 25). For John Paul II, the Christian moral life is Christocentric not merely because Christ is a moral teacher but more fundamentally because Christ is the principle of the moral life as both its pattern and source. As the pattern and exemplar of the moral life, he “sheds light on man’s condition and his integral vocation,” manifesting concretely the pattern of life to which human beings are called (no. 2). As source of the moral life, he communicates a share in his own life to human beings by grace, empowering them to follow him not simply by the repetition of his actions but the conformity of their very selves.

Echoes of the Christocentric movement from a half-century earlier are readily perceptible in the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*. The notions of Christ being a model and exemplar of the moral life and of that life consisting principally in following Christ through outward imitation and interior conformity align with central themes in the works of moral theologians like Tillmann, Gillon, and the early Häring and suggest that the pope seeks to recover, albeit in his own way, the insights of the movement to which these figures belong. Although *Veritatis Splendor* does not cite any of these theologians explicitly—indeed, the encyclical studiously avoids direct references to any theologians after Alphonsus Liguori—there are good, albeit indirect, reasons to think that John Paul II was familiar with their thought.⁵³

⁵³ With respect to Tillmann, one finds in Karol Wojtyła’s habilitation thesis on Max Scheler two citations of *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi* as an attempt to appropriate Scheler’s personalist philosophy and emphasis on imitation as a framework for Christian ethics. See Karol Wojtyła, *The Lublin Lectures and Works on Max Scheler*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 505, 561. Concerning Gillon’s influence, the evidence is less direct. However, Gillon served on the faculty of the Angelicum while Wojtyła was completing his doctorate there. Finally, with respect to Häring, Wojtyła clearly knew him personally from their common work on the drafting committee for *Gaudium et Spes* during the Second Vatican Council. See John Sikorski, “Towards a Conjugal Spirituality: Karol Wojtyła’s Vision of Marriage Before, During, and After Vatican II,” *Journal of Moral*

Building upon their insights in the service of a more Christocentric moral theology, the opening chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* does not merely aim to correct certain contemporary theories about human action, conscience, and freedom, but proposes a fundamentally different, *ressourcement* approach to moral theology by beginning with the person of Christ and his irreducible centrality to the moral life.

THE CHRISTOCENTRIC UNITY OF *VERITATIS SPLENDOR*

Among the relatively few moral theologians who give sustained attention to the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*, one typically finds enthusiasm for the pope's desire to put the person of Christ and the life of discipleship at the forefront of moral theology.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, some of them, although generally amenable to its effort to root moral theology in Scripture and the person of Christ, contend that the encyclical ultimately undermines its own Christocentric impulses. Thus, to show that *Veritatis Splendor* does in fact present a thoroughly and consistently Christocentric moral theology, it is necessary to consider and respond to two objections.

Christ and the Moral Law

The first objection, advanced most prominently by Charles Curran, argues that the Christocentrism of chapter one is subordinated—in that very chapter—to a morality of law and obligation. Although Curran, like many revisionists, devotes most of his attention to the contentious issues of the encyclical's second chapter, he is nonetheless appreciative of John Paul II's substantive engagement with Scripture and emphasis on the centrality of Christ. Curran argues, however, that the encyclical's references to Jesus are ultimately futile because they remain trapped within an overarching legal approach to the moral life. He alleges that

The encyclical has distorted the meaning of Christian morality by putting primary emphasis on obedience to the Ten Commandments. . . . In fairness, however, the encyclical tries to put the commandments of the

Theology 6, no. 2 (2017): 103–129. Moreover, as noted above, *The Law of Christ* was perhaps the most well-known moral textbook in circulation in the years preceding the Council, so it is likely that Wojtyła would have had at least some familiarity with its central claims and methods.

⁵⁴ A notable exception is to be found in scholars who criticize the pope's exegesis of the rich young man pericope in chapter one. See, for example, Gareth Moore, "Some Remarks on the Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*," in *The Splendor of Accuracy*, 71–98.

Decalogue into a bigger picture. The pope mentions the invitation to be perfect, the following of Jesus, commitment to the very person of Jesus, and the new law of love proposed by St. Paul. But the encyclical proposes all these as illustrations of obedience to God's will and law.⁵⁵

According to Curran, even the theological, personalist elements of the encyclical that might be hailed as evidence of a renewal of moral theology are deprived of their force because they are framed within a legal paradigm. Indeed, Curran maintains that even the opening chapter's presentation of the call to perfection is reduced to a species of law-following insofar as "the call to holiness is based on a command to love one another as God has loved us and involves a free and loving obedience to the will of the Father."⁵⁶

Curran's criticism reflects the dominant trend of treating chapter two as the true heart of *Veritatis Splendor* and then interpreting chapter one in light of chapter two. As Curran reads it, the second chapter enforces a legal paradigm concerned with insisting that certain acts are always and everywhere impermissible, and he views the first chapter as a biblical preamble put at the service of this higher goal. Yet, if one attends carefully to the first chapter's articulation of the relationship between the commandments and the following of Christ, one finds precisely the opposite of what Curran alleges.

Law is an essential element of Christian ethics, and it cannot merely be jettisoned. Rather, the challenge is to understand and appreciate the importance of law and its role within the broader context of the Christian moral life, and this is precisely what *Veritatis Splendor* aims to do. John Paul II seizes on Jesus's initial answer to the rich young man's question as an opportunity to emphasize the indispensability of the commandments, to be sure.⁵⁷ Yet, the young man's reply that he has observed all the commandments and still lacks something also provides an occasion for the pope to illustrate how the commandments are not ends in themselves. As John Paul II explains, "The young man's commitment to respect all the moral demands of the commandments represents the absolutely essential ground in which the desire for perfection can take root and mature, the desire, that is, for the meaning of the commandments to be completely fulfilled in following Christ" (no. 17). Here, one can see clearly how the commandments are ordered to the following of Christ. Again, he insists, "Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood

⁵⁵ Charles E. Curran, *The Moral Theology of John Paul II* (Georgetown University Press, 2005), 53.

⁵⁶ Curran, *The Moral Theology of John Paul II*, 105.

⁵⁷ See *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 12: "From the very lips of Jesus, the new Moses, man is once again given the commandments of the Decalogue. Jesus himself definitively confirms them and proposes them to us as the way and condition of salvation."

as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey toward perfection, at the heart of which is love” (no. 15). The summons to perfection, in other words, is not reducible to obeying the commandments, but at the same time the call to perfection does not leave the commandments behind. Rather, John Paul II suggests that the freedom coming from following Jesus transforms the commandments into invitations to deeper and more perfect love.⁵⁸

Thus, even as *Veritatis Splendor* upholds the inviolability of the commandments, it recognizes that the commandments are not the only vocabulary—or even the best vocabulary—for describing the Christian life. John Paul II affirms that “love and life according to the Gospel cannot be thought of first and foremost as a kind of precept” but only as the graced response to Jesus’s call to follow him (no. 23). Again, the pope insists that this way of discipleship “is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father” (no. 19). Far from reducing Jesus’s summons to perfection to mere obedience to precepts, the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* clearly views the moral law as being at the service of a decidedly Christocentric vision of the moral life.⁵⁹

The Theo-Logical Coherence of Veritatis Splendor

The second—and, in my view, more potent—line of criticism alleges that the Christological overture in *Veritatis Splendor*’s first chapter is ultimately incompatible with the methodology that governs its second chapter. Thus, William Spohn contends that *Veritatis Splendor* “opens up the possibility of a Christocentric ethics, at least initially. It subordinates a realist epistemology and the natural law to the religious realities of discipleship and the cross, which are the moral core of Christian discipleship. . . . However, the encyclical does not sustain this Christological ethics into the remainder of the text.”⁶⁰ Unlike Curran, Spohn recognizes the Christocentric integrity of

⁵⁸ See, for example, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 15: “Thus the commandment ‘You shall not murder’ becomes a call to an attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one’s neighbor. The precept prohibiting adultery becomes an invitation to a pure way of looking at others, capable of respecting the spousal meaning of the body.”

⁵⁹ Livio Melina, “The Desire for Happiness and the Commandments in the First Chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*,” trans. Margaret H. McCarthy, in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 143–160.

⁶⁰ William C. Spohn, “Morality on the Way of Discipleship: The Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, 94.

chapter one. However, the problem he detects is a fundamental inconsistency between the purportedly Christocentric aims expressed in chapter one and the theological concepts on which the rest of the document relies. He laments that while “the encyclical promises a Christonomous ethics of discipleship . . . it cannot deliver because it reduces morality to a matter of rules and principles. The ethics of discipleship gets quickly transformed into a theonomous naturalism which enshrines the natural law realism of the recent tradition.”⁶¹ For Spohn, *Veritatis Splendor* is, at best, an incoherent encyclical. Its theologically rich, biblically inspired, and Christocentric opening chapter offers a vision of the moral life undermined and contradicted by the act-based, rule-focused philosophical ethics presented in chapter two.⁶² This is a serious charge and one worthy of careful consideration, for if *Veritatis Splendor* is to have value for Catholic moral theology, it must be internally coherent. It is therefore necessary to determine the extent to which the encyclical possesses intrinsic unity and, accordingly, understand how the seemingly disparate emphases of its first two chapters fit together.

It is true that explicit mention of the person of Christ all but disappears in the second chapter. On the one hand, one might account for this shift in terms of the encyclical’s twofold aim as Pinckaers articulates it. Thus, one could argue that while chapter one articulates a constructive vision for a Christocentric moral theology, that vision can only be developed if certain technical errors are first corrected. Thus, chapter two undertakes its polemical work for the sake of a fuller implementation of the Christocentric vision outlined but not fleshed out in the opening chapter. While this is certainly a plausible rationale for the encyclical’s structure, it does not adequately resolve the issue at hand, because it does not explain how clarifying technical questions about human action and natural law is at the service of advancing a Christocentric moral theology. A more promising approach to discerning the conceptual unity of *Veritatis Splendor* requires engaging the substance of its treatment of these technical questions in order to recognize a Christocentric perspective even there. A prime candidate for such examination is its treatment of natural law, the foundation for its account of human action.

⁶¹ Spohn, “Morality on the Way of Discipleship,” 102. See also Karl P. Donfried, “The Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics: Protestants Engage John Paul II’s Moral Encyclicals*, ed. Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter (Eerdman, 1998), 46.

⁶² See also Nicholas Lash, “Crisis and Tradition in *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 23.

Veritatis Splendor emphasizes the natural law as an expression of divine wisdom.⁶³ John Paul II expresses this conviction in his very first reference to the natural law in chapter one where he submits that God instructs humanity about what is good first of all “by creating man and ordering him with wisdom and love to his final end through the law which is inscribed in his heart, the ‘natural law.’” (no. 12). He elaborates on this with greater precision in chapter two, where he situates the natural law within the broader context of the eternal law. Following Augustine and Aquinas, he posits that the eternal law is nothing other than God’s providential governance of creation, an expression of divine wisdom by which God leads all created things to their proper acts and ends. This providence, he notes, extends in a unique manner to human beings whom God cares for “‘from within,’ through reason, which by its natural knowledge of God’s eternal law, is consequently able to show man the right direction to take in his free actions” (no. 43). Thus, John Paul II concludes that the natural law, discerned by reason, “enters here as the human expression of God’s eternal law” (no. 43).

By all accounts, John Paul II here rehearses a very traditional view of the natural law which underscores its source in God’s wisdom, congruency with human nature, and accessibility to human reason. At the same time, he seeks to highlight the theological character of the natural law by connecting it specifically to the person of Christ. In an insightful essay, Lawrence Welch links the pope’s observations about the eternal law in *Veritatis Splendor* to an even more direct claim he makes in his 1986 encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*. Reflecting on the nature of sin as embodying “a rejection, or at least a turning away from the truth contained in the Word of God,” John Paul II attests that “this Word is the same Word who was ‘in the beginning with God,’ who ‘was God,’ and without whom ‘nothing has been made of all that is,’ since ‘the world was made through him.’ He is the Word who is also the eternal law, the source of every law which regulates the world and especially human acts” (no. 33).⁶⁴ Here, John Paul II explicitly equates the eternal law with the Person of the Word, who becomes incarnate in Christ. Such an identification further entails that the natural law is the human person’s rational participation in the Word. It is, in other words, to assert the fundamentally Christological character of the natural law.

In *Veritatis Splendor* itself, John Paul II emphasizes the unity of the moral law in the wisdom of God and, by extension, the

⁶³ Russell Hittinger, “*Veritatis Splendor* and the Theology of Natural Law,” in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 97–128.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Lawrence J. Welch, “Christ, the Moral Law, and the Teaching Authority of the Magisterium,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999): 24.

Christological foundation of the moral law. In one particularly illustrative passage, he submits that

Even if moral-theological reflection usually distinguishes between the positive or revealed law of God and the natural law, and, within the economy of salvation, between the “old” and the “new” law, it must not be forgotten that these and other useful distinctions always refer to that law whose author is the one and the same God and which is always meant for man. The different ways in which God, acting in history, cares for the world and for mankind are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they support each other and intersect. They have their origin and goal in the eternal, wise and loving counsel whereby God predestines men and women “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). (no. 45)

Here, John Paul II does not merely situate natural law and divine law together under the broader heading of the eternal law as an expression of divine providence, he identifies their origin and goal as the conformity of human beings to Christ as their ontological exemplar. Human beings are not merely redeemed by the person of the Son, they are also *created* in, through, and after the pattern of the Son. As Welch observes, “What the Pope takes very seriously is Christ, the head and the Alpha by whom the human race is redeemed and in whom we are created. . . . Just as creation and redemption are distinct but find their unity in Christ, so the natural law and the positive law find their unity in Christ the Word, who is the eternal law.”⁶⁵

Similarly, when he reflects on the challenges posed to the universality and immutability of the natural law by variations among cultural and historical particularities, John Paul II appeals to a metaphysical account of human nature to argue that human beings, although existing within and shaped by a particular culture, nevertheless are “not exhaustively defined by that same culture” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 53). Yet, this appeal to human nature and its intrinsic dignity as morally normative is further buttressed by a Christological appeal. He contends that

To call into question the permanent structural elements of man . . . would render meaningless Jesus’s reference to the “beginning,” precisely where the social and cultural context of the time had distorted the primordial meaning and the role of certain moral norms. This is the reason why “the Church affirms that underlying so many changes there are some things which do not change and are ultimately founded upon Christ, who is the same yesterday and today and

⁶⁵ Welch, “Christ, the Moral Law, and the Teaching Authority of the Magisterium,” 26.

forever.” Christ is the “Beginning” who, having taken on human nature, definitively illumines it in its constitutive elements and in its dynamism of charity towards God and neighbor. (no. 53)⁶⁶

Here again one sees at work John Paul II’s Christocentric anthropology, drawn from *Gaudium et Spes* as the foundation for a Christocentric view of the moral law, both natural and revealed. In short, if human nature provides the norm for human action, and human nature is ultimately patterned after the person of Christ as its exemplar, then even the natural law itself is inherently Christological.

Commenting on *Veritatis Splendor* ten years after its promulgation, Joseph Ratzinger offers a hermeneutical key to discerning the encyclical’s internal unity and coherence. He argues that it presents a “magnificent renewed vision that is at once Christological and rational, because Christ is the *Logos*. . . . 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 the *Logos* made flesh, that is, the fullness of creative reason itself, who speaks to us and opens our eyes to see anew . . . the presence of a creative truth that lies at the foundation of being.”⁶⁷ The person of Christ is not only the *Logos* who gives logical consistency to John Paul II’s encyclical but, more importantly, He is the *Logos* who grants coherence to the entire moral order, both natural and revealed.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that the Christocentric moral vision that John Paul II proposes in *Veritatis Splendor* is not altogether novel but involves a creative retrieval of an earlier Christocentric renaissance in moral theology during the decades preceding Vatican II. Without seeking to marginalize the encyclical’s crucial interventions in technical debates in moral theology, I have argued that, more than a philosophical treatise or a brute exercise of magisterial power, *Veritatis Splendor* is a work of *ressourcement* whose first chapter must be taken seriously as a positive proposal for the ongoing renewal of Catholic moral theology. Its thoroughly and coherently Christocentric approach opens promising new avenues for, among other things, integrating traditional understandings of the moral law with the

⁶⁶ This passage quotes *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 10, another Christocentric text, which asserts that Christ “can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny” and that “in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point, and the goal of man.”

⁶⁷ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Communio* 32, no. 2 (2005): 365.

evangelical summons to life in Christ, highlighting the centrality of ecclesial discipleship to the moral life, and overcoming the artificial barriers often set between moral theology and other aspects of Christian theology and practice.

When *Veritatis Splendor* was first released, the Anglican ethicist Oliver O'Donovan remarked that “everyone has had a nice word to say about this first section, [but] not everyone has appreciated its innovative strength as a program for moral theology. Future generations may find the Splendor of *Veritatis Splendor* here in these pages which shape the moral discourse of the church as an evangelical proclamation.”⁶⁸ The task of continuing to receive the wisdom of *Veritatis Splendor* three decades later only stands to benefit from such an exhortation to a more robust theological engagement with its constructive first chapter's—and, indeed, the entire encyclical's—Christocentric moral vision and the *ressourcement* that undergirds it. **M**

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⁶⁸ Oliver O'Donovan, “A Summons to Reality,” in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, 42.