

Seeds for an Encounter Ethics: The Fruit of Reading *Veritatis Splendor* Beyond a Post-Conciliar Binary Narrative

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Abstract: Two of the more recent methodological narratives about twentieth-century moral theology, written by James Keenan and Matthew Levering, argue that an intractable methodological division over law and conscience emerges in the wake of Vatican II. Within these narratives, *Veritatis Splendor* is situated as authoritatively taking sides amidst this division, leaving *Veritatis Splendor*'s key methodological insights out of view. While (re)turning to a more spiritual approach to moral theology, the Second Vatican Council does not set out a clear *method* for the discipline but instead leaves post-conciliar moral theology with the task of figuring out *how to do moral theology according to this new paradigm*. *Veritatis Splendor* ought to be read as a continuation and deepening of this post-conciliar moral methodological project set in motion by Vatican II. Through the concept of “encounter with Christ” and its emphasis on the lives of the saints, *Veritatis Splendor* plants seeds for the development of a post-conciliar moral theological method consistent with the methodological task set out by the Second Vatican Council, a foundational point of methodological continuity between “revisionists” and “traditionalists,” and responsive to unresolved methodological concerns from the Council.

THERE HAS BEEN WIDESPREAD DISAGREEMENT ABOUT *Veritatis Splendor*'s true purpose since the time of its promulgation.¹ For example, *Veritatis Splendor* has been interpreted as attempting “to endorse total assent and submission to all utterance of the Pope,”² and yet it also has been inter-

NB: In this article, the author often preferred to use the plural “criteria” instead of the singular “criterion.”—Ed.

¹ See Richard A. McCormick, “Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Theological Studies* 55, no. 3 (1994): 481–506 and “*Veritatis Splendor*,” *Commonweal* 120, no. 18 (1993): 11–18.

² Bernard Häring, “A Distrust that Wounds,” in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology No. 10*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (Paulist, 1998), 42.

preted as attempting to reaffirm “that the exceptionlessness of . . . norms is a revealed truth.”³ Since *Veritatis Splendor* is a post-conciliar encyclical on moral theology, questions about how to interpret the purpose of *Veritatis Splendor* are ultimately inseparable from questions about how to interpret the meaning of the Second Vatican Council’s call to renew moral theology. Yet, there has also been widespread disagreement about how to interpret *Veritatis Splendor*’s relationship to the Second Vatican Council and the moral methodological developments it set in motion. *Veritatis Splendor* has been interpreted as “a retreat from the reforms of the Council and retrenchment of older pre-conciliar ideas.”⁴ As a result, some theologians argue that the encyclical is an “attempt to put the lid on what has been a lively debate for more than 30 years.”⁵ In contrast, *Veritatis Splendor* has also been interpreted as “a critical discernment and purification of the Council’s vision which had been clouded,”⁶ leading some theologians to argue that the encyclical “represents a significant step on the road to rehabilitating and communicating the tradition.”⁷

These conflicting interpretations are embedded within larger narratives that view *Veritatis Splendor* as an authoritative intervention in methodological disputes in the field of moral theology.⁸ James Keenan and Matthew Levering have written two of the more popular narratives about methodological developments in twentieth-century

³ Germain Grisez, “Revelation vs. Dissent,” in *John Paul II and Moral Theology*, 40.

⁴ John S. Grabowski, “The Luminous Excess of the Acting Person: Assessing the Impact of Pope John Paul II on American Catholic Moral Theology,” in *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2012): 118. See also Mary Elsbernd, “The Reinterpretation of *Gaudium et Spes* in *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Horizons* 29 no. 2 (2002): 225–39; Charles Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), 98.

⁵ William Uren, “Think of the Consequences,” *Eureka Street* 3, no. 9 (1993): 6–7, at 6. See also Lawrence S. Cunningham, “*Veritatis Splendor*,” *Commonweal* 120, no. 18, (1993): 11–18.

⁶ Grabowski, “The Luminous Excess of the Acting Person,” 118. See also Tracey Rowland, “Pope John Paul II: Authentic Interpreter of Vatican II,” in *John Paul the Great: Maker of the Post Conciliar Church* (Ignatius, 2005), 27–48.

⁷ Russell Hittinger, “The Splendor of Truth: A Symposium,” *First Things* 39 (January 1994): 17. See also Richard John Neuhaus, “The Splendor of Truth: A Symposium” *First Things* 39 (January 1994): 15.

⁸ For additional “revisionist” narratives see Charles Curran, *Diverse Voices in Modern US Moral Theology* (Georgetown University Press, 2018); Klaus Demmer, MSC, *Shaping the Moral Life: An Approach to Moral Theology*, ed. James F. Keenan, SJ, trans. Roberto Dell’Oro (Georgetown University Press, 2000). For additional “traditionalist” narratives see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin, OP (St. Augustine’s Press, 2001); Romanus Cessario, OP, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

Catholic moral theology. In their own ways, Keenan and Levering argue that an intractable methodological division over law and conscience emerging in moral theology between so-called “revisionist” and “traditionalist” theologians over the course of the twentieth century becomes solidified in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Both narratives situate *Veritatis Splendor* as authoritatively taking sides amidst this intractable division. Although these narratives rightly recognize that post-conciliar moral theology suffers from methodological divisions and that *Veritatis Splendor* seeks to speak authoritatively on method in moral theology, they wrongly understand the nature of post-conciliar division, incorrectly situate *Veritatis Splendor* as taking sides amidst this division, and fail to seriously recognize *Veritatis Splendor*’s key methodological contributions to post-conciliar moral theology.

I propose to situate and read *Veritatis Splendor* within an alternative twentieth-century and post-conciliar methodological narrative. *Veritatis Splendor* ought to be read as a continuation and deepening of the post-conciliar moral methodological project set in motion by Vatican II: “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 encounter of a love that then also knows how to create corresponding actions.”⁹ In order to make this case, I begin by outlining Keenan’s and Levering’s recent narratives about method in twentieth-century Catholic moral theology. Following this, I clarify the meaning of the term “method” and describe what to suffer from methodological divisions means for the discipline of Catholic moral theology. I contend that these methodological narratives suffer from a law-conscience binary framework that cannot make sense of or accurately recognize the underlying methodological unity at work in post-conciliar moral theology.

In order to retrieve a coherent narrative by which to make sense of post-conciliar moral theology’s underlying methodological unity and express divisions, I return to the Second Vatican Council to seek a new horizon in which to situate and interpret *Veritatis Splendor*. While turning to a spiritual, moral framework in *Optatam Totius*, I argue that the Second Vatican Council does not set out a clear method for this new framework and leaves difficulties about it unresolved. I conclude that when read beyond a post-conciliar methodological binary

⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *Communio* 32 (Summer 2005): 359. In this view, I follow Joseph Ratzinger and John S. Grabowski. See Grabowski, “The Luminous Excess of the Acting Person,” and Grabowski, “Catechesis and Moral Theology: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Christian Experience,” *Nova et Vetera* 13, no. 2 (2015): 459–487.

narrative, *Veritatis Splendor* plants seeds for the development of a post-conciliar moral theological method consistent with the methodological task set out by the Second Vatican Council, a foundational point of methodological continuity between “revisionists” and “traditionalists,” and responsive to unresolved methodological concerns from the Council as manifest in the contention over *De Ordine Morali*. Through its approach to Scripture, attention to the saints, and epistemological turn to “encounter with Christ,” *Veritatis Splendor* teaches that the heart of moral method and light of faith is Christ’s call to “Come, follow me!” (no. 14).

A HOUSE DIVIDED: POPULAR NARRATIVES ON POST-CONCILIAR METHOD

In this section, I outline Keenan’s and Levering’s narratives about the developmental shifts in moral theological method prior to and in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. I delineate the way Keenan and Levering situate and interpret *Veritatis Splendor* within the context of their methodological narratives. Following these outlines, I then evaluate Keenan’s and Levering’s accounts of the nature and source of methodological division in post-conciliar moral theology. I argue that Keenan’s and Levering’s narratives invoke more or less the same law-conscience binary methodological narrative where each methodological track is defined against the other by means of law or conscience. I conclude that as a result of their binary frameworks, Keenan’s and Levering’s narratives of post-conciliar method cannot recognize, let alone account for the fact that the “revisionist” track and the “traditionalist” track have the same formal criteria and both expressly understand themselves to be in continuity with the Second Vatican Council. I deduce that a methodological narrative of post-conciliar moral theology that can make sense of and account for these phenomena is necessary.

Post-Conciliar Methodological Divisions over Law and Conscience

Like most theologians, Keenan and Levering agree on the distinctive features of conciliar and, thus, post-conciliar moral theology. They agree that the Second Vatican Council turns away from the more legalist framework of the moral manuals to the more spiritual framework of Sacred Scripture. They agree that the Council sets out clear features for moral theological method given this paradigmatic shift away from legalism: (1) turn to the subject or person, (2) incorporation of virtue, (3) recognition of the social and historical dimensions of human life, (4) basis in Scripture, and (5) Christ-

centered approach.¹⁰ Despite this agreement, as both Levering and Keenan narrate, disagreement begins to emerge over what constitutes an authentic instantiation of post-conciliar moral theology in the wake of the Council.

According to Levering's narrative, "Most moral theologians and most bishops found themselves operating out of two very different and distinctive methodologies that responded to very different presuppositions" following the Second Vatican Council.¹¹ Moral theology bifurcated into "a minority of moral theologians" who "carried forward" this conciliar vision and into a majority of "mainstream" moral theologians who advanced "a conscience-centered morality resituated within a transcendental anthropology" that distorts the conciliar vision.¹² Levering argues that this conscience-centered method "slides inevitably into sovereign subjectivity"¹³ because the individual person's conscience is made the formal criteria for evaluating truth claims and is no longer "focused upon receptivity to eternal law and universal norms."¹⁴ To Levering, the other method, which he identifies as faithful to the conciliar project, pursues truth "in obedience to the God who is both love and lawgiver," and "offers us beatitude, but on the path of cruciform love."¹⁵ This method has "Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit at the center" as its formal criteria for evaluating truth claims, "healing and elevating the powers of human nature in accord with God's law."¹⁶

Keenan's narrative also notes a methodological bifurcation, writing that moral theology began "taking place and developing on two different tracks" with "conscience" as "the point of departure for" one track¹⁷ and "God's law" as the point of departure for the other.¹⁸ For Keenan, however, this bifurcation is understood not so much as a split between those who distort the Council and those who carry it forward but between those who reject the Council and those who carry it forward.¹⁹ Keenan argues that the law-centered track pursues moral truth "in specific and (possibly) long-held propositional utterances" such that law as interpreted or promulgated by magisterial authority is

¹⁰ See Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 195; Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 35–36.

¹¹ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 1.

¹² Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 196.

¹³ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 195. See also 205–206.

¹⁴ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 127–128.

¹⁵ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 205.

¹⁶ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 206.

¹⁷ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 97.

¹⁸ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 112.

¹⁹ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 118 and 123.

its formal criteria for evaluating truth claims.²⁰ Parallel to Levering, Keenan asserts that the conscience-centered track, the one he identifies as faithful to the Conciliar project, “pursues truth in the person of Christ and the realization of that truth in the very human lives of Christians.”²¹ For Keenan, this method has Christ—not self-will—as its formal criteria for evaluating truth claims.²²

The Place of Veritatis Splendor Within These Methodological Narratives

Where is *Veritatis Splendor*, the only encyclical on Catholic moral theology, situated in these twentieth-century narratives about moral theology? Although Keenan recognizes that *Veritatis Splendor* “is in tone and substance innovative in its use of Scripture,”²³ he sees the encyclical as “for the most part a very lengthy philosophical document, written it seems by mostly philosophers,” who do not accurately understand and thereby, “[write] erroneously about the writing of moral theologians.”²⁴ Within his narrative framework, Keenan interprets *Veritatis Splendor* as a work of “neo-manualism” that admonishes revisionist moral theologians without fully or accurately grasping their arguments.²⁵ By neo-manualist, Keenan means that *Veritatis Splendor* is teaching morals through “propositional utterances” rather than “through the person of Christ and the realization of that truth” in the lives of Christians.²⁶ Keenan situates *Veritatis Splendor* within his post-conciliar methodological bifurcation narrative as authoritatively taking sides—the side of the law-centered track, which he argues wants to return to pre-conciliar moral theology. From this vantage point, whatever innovative use of Scripture or other methodological insights *Veritatis Splendor* might offer, they would ultimately serve a law-centered methodology that seeks to reject the Council, making further development of those recognized insights inherently nonsensical.

Within Levering’s narrative framework, *Veritatis Splendor* is interpreted as “[ensuring] that the commandments are not misunderstood

²⁰ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 120.

²¹ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 120.

²² Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 120.

²³ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 128. For other analyses of *Veritatis Splendor* and its reception by Keenan, see James F. Keenan, SJ, and Thomas R. Kopfensteiner, “Moral Theology out of Western Europe,” *Theological Studies* 59, no. 1 (1998): 107–135; James F. Keenan, SJ, “Fundamental Moral Theology at the Beginning of the New Millennium: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2004): 119–140.

²⁴ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 133.

²⁵ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 133.

²⁶ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 120.

as external or arbitrary laws of an aloof God”²⁷ but as a personal gift through its “biblical and existentialist emphases.”²⁸ Unlike Keenan, Levering devotes very little time to *Veritatis Splendor* or Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II in his narrative of twentieth-century moral theology. *Veritatis Splendor* shows up twice in Levering’s narrative: once in his survey of the thought of Servais Pinckaers and once in his critique of Keenan. Levering responds to Keenan’s charge of neo-manualism against the encyclical, retorting “Perhaps by this statement, Keenan means simply that *Veritatis Splendor* defends universal moral norms as well as the ability of the magisterium to authoritatively teach these norms, and it also contains teachings on the structure of human action, natural law, conscience, and sin.”²⁹ Levering finds Keenan’s charge not simply wrong but unintelligible. Within Levering’s narrative, *Veritatis Splendor* is ultimately interpreted as a work of renewal, taking the side of the Christ-centered track over and against the conscience-centered track. From this vantage point, as evident in his retort to Keenan, *Veritatis Splendor* is viewed more as an authoritative corrective than a work rich with its own methodological insights. It is not simply an odd choice for Levering’s book on twentieth-century moral theology to not robustly address the unique twentieth-century encyclical on moral theology. It is a telling choice.

EVALUATING METHODOLOGICAL DIVISION AND BINARY NARRATIVES

Keenan and Levering tell similar narratives about twentieth-century moral theology and *Veritatis Splendor*’s place within it: the “good guys” and the “bad guys” happen to be a bit different, but the narrative arc and contour of events are just about the same. Do these similar narratives get the story right? To what extent are Keenan’s and Levering’s descriptions of post-conciliar methodological division coherent and accurate? What does it mean for Catholic moral theology to suffer methodological division? Over what precisely does this division occur? In the section to follow, I evaluate the methodological bifurcation narratives Keenan and Levering tell by investigating what it means for a field like Catholic moral theology to suffer methodological division. I do this by clarifying what a methodological division is, what the sources of methodological division are, and how, if at all, methodological division can be overcome and adjudicated. I turn to Bernard Lonergan for some basic conceptual distinctions

²⁷ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 119.

²⁸ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 197.

²⁹ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 197.

regarding method and methodological division.³⁰ I do not presume to exhaustively treat method and its implications for theology or the church.

Methodological Division Not over Content

The term “method” derives from the Ancient Greek word “μέθοδος” meaning “following after,” “pursuit of knowledge,” or “mode of prosecuting such inquiry.”³¹ Method is not a content. Method is an activity; it is a being-at-work.³² Method is not the *outcome* or *result* of a study, investigation, or inquiry in a given field (e.g., don’t run red lights!). Method rather is the activity by which outcomes in a given field are properly achieved (e.g., how we determine proper driving etiquette). Therefore, for a discipline to undergo a change or shift in method is not about a change or shift in its content or outcomes. A field’s content or outcomes could very well stay the same even if its method changes. It is about how to properly achieve insights in a field. Reflection on methodological division is thus reflection on the formal criteria and “operations by which those [contents] are reached.”³³

Having clarified that method is an activity, we can then say that Keenan and Levering rightly identify that the methodological division in post-conciliar moral theology is not division over content but operations and criteria. Keenan and Levering identify that the methodological division is division over the operations of law and conscience. Neither Keenan nor Levering, for example, attributes the post-conciliar methodological division to disagreements over the permissibility of married couples using artificial contraception. Different contents or outcomes like this can only be adjudicated on the level of how the field *arrived at* those outcomes, not on the level of the outcomes themselves. Conflating method and content can lead to intractable divisions in a field because results do not possess a way out of methodological conflict since methodological conflict is criteriological conflict.

³⁰ For the purpose of this article, I am only taking up Lonergan’s *description* of method to clarify the concept and meaning of the term. It is beyond the scope of this present investigation to give an account of or evaluate Lonergan’s thought.

³¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert A. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Clarendon, 1940), s.v. “μέθοδος.”

³² Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works*, vol. 14, *Method in Theology*, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Didosky (University of Toronto Press, 1972), 8–10.

³³ See Jeremy D. Wilkins, *Before Truth: Lonergan, Aquinas, and the Problem of Wisdom* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 185. See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 345.

Methodological Division as Criteriological

A method is the formal criteria or “normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results” by which a field achieves its insights.³⁴ Method is not a rule or set of rules and procedures for performing operations (e.g., if you catch on fire, stop, drop, and roll!). Method is also not an operation (e.g., stopping, dropping, rolling) or set of operations and their ordering (e.g., [1] stop, [2] drop, [3] roll). Method is the criteriological pattern *by which* operations are determined, operate, and stand in relation to one another. Methodological divisions over operations and the ordering of operations always have their basis in a more original division over the formal criteria of a field’s method. The formal criteria by which a field determines that it has properly performed its operations depends on how a field conceives of the way a knower comes to know an object in truth. For instance, the *operations* of stopping, dropping, and rolling are not random but have their basis in *what* fire is, how we *know* what fire is, and our understanding that it is physically harmful for human persons to be on fire. Likewise, the *ordering* of the operations is not random but has its basis in *what* the activities of stopping, dropping, and rolling *are* and how these activities relate to one another within the context of something being on fire. If the formal criteria (e.g., fire injury prevention) changes such that what is understood by “fire,” “injury,” or “prevention” is no longer the same, then what is determining the operations and their ordering would no longer be the same.

To experience methodological division in theology is to have a theology unclear or in dispute about its proper criteria. Both Keenan and Levering argue that moral theology splits into two methodological tracks following the Council because one side rejects or distorts and the other preserves and carries on the Council in some way. Levering’s methodological division is born of “revisionist” conceptions of transcendental subjectivity that do not sufficiently consider the stable character of reality and the divine ground of human knowing. According to Levering, “revisionists” have conscience as their formal criterion, causing their method to err in its determination and ordering of operations, whereas “traditionalists” more rightly have encounter with Christ as their formal criterion for moral theology. For Keenan, methodological division is born of “traditionalist” conceptions of magisterial authority and law that do not sufficiently consider the historical character of reality and human knowing. According to Keenan, “traditionalists” have law as interpreted by the Magisterium

³⁴ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 8, emphasis added.

for their formal criterion, causing their method to err in its determination and ordering of operations, whereas “revisionists” more rightly have encounter with Christ as their formal criterion for moral theology.

One of the major problems with their conceptions of methodological division is that it is simply inaccurate. Both narratives designate Christ and the human person’s encounter with Christ—not law or conscience—as the formal criteria of operations for evaluating truth claims for the track they recognize as consistent with Vatican II. Neither Keenan nor Levering incorporates this fact into his narrative understanding of post-conciliar moral theology. Here, we begin to see potential sources for intractability and division. Suppose moral method bifurcates and continues on two different tracks after the Second Vatican Council. How is it possible that these two tracks have the same formal criteria and claim to be consistent with the Council?

Overcoming and Adjudicating Methodological Division

Methodological divisions are ultimately ontological, epistemological, or anthropological in nature. The ultimate ground upon which to fully adjudicate methodological division is at the level of *what* can be known and *how* what is knowable can come to be known by the knower.³⁵ Without differentiating formal criteria from a foundational framework, there is no ground upon which to fully assess whether a field’s formal criteria rightly reflects its ontology, epistemology, or anthropology. In order to be fully adjudicated, reflection on methodological division cannot stay at the level of operation or the ordering of operation but must move to the level of reflecting on foundations and formal criteria. Even formal criteria, especially when in dispute, must return to a field’s foundations for understanding; it must return to what is held in common to be true. By definition, the “revisionist” track from Levering’s view is defined as revisionist because its method is distinct from and incompatible with traditionalist methodology. Likewise, from Keenan’s perspective, the “traditionalist” track is defined as traditionalist because its method is distinct from and incompatible with revisionist methodology. Keenan’s and Levering’s narratives of method in post-conciliar moral theology thus appear to be law-conscience binary narratives and more or less the same law-conscience binary narrative from different sides of the binary.

By law-conscience binary narrative, I mean a narrative framework in which “conscience’s and law’s self-understandings depend in part on defining themselves in opposition to each other and on each

³⁵ See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, 5th ed. (University of Toronto Press, 1992), 5.

conceiving itself as the corrective alternative to the other” such that one or the other must lose and lose in a way where it is not simply incorrect but anathema.³⁶ Keenan’s and Levering’s post-conciliar methodological narratives fit this description insofar as they define the methodological differences they see in post-conciliar moral method against one another, do so using law and conscience, and regard the alternative as contrary to the spirit of Vatican II and the church as a whole.³⁷ Since they are defined against one another, there is no ground upon which to recognize that they both claim to have the same method.

The source of post-conciliar methodological division cannot be post-conciliar methodological division itself. What is uniquely problematic about a law-conscience binary narrative is that when the two sides define themselves against one another, the true source of their methodological division becomes occluded because the existence of the method itself is set forth as the source of the division. Even though this is distinct from a division over content, it takes on the character of a division over content because the ground on which to investigate what is going wrong is defined out of view. Methodological division in this kind of binary narrative cannot be mediated or overcome because it precludes the possibility of investigation or adjudication. This has a direct bearing on *Veritatis Splendor*. When read within a methodological binary framework it, by definition, cannot offer any insights or amelioration between the two tracks because to be on the side of one track is to be against and working toward eradicating the other.

RETRIEVING A METHODOLOGICAL NARRATIVE BEYOND THE BINARY

Returning to what most, if not all, post-conciliar moral theologians methodologically share in common—personalist, Christ-centered formal criteria—is the proper next step for trying to find a more accurate narrative framework for post-conciliar moral theology in which to situate *Veritatis Splendor*. I turn to *De Ordine Morali*, the draft conciliar document on morality, and *Optatam Totius*, the Council’s most explicit statement on moral theological method as such. I first argue that there is moral methodological division at the Second Vatican Council, as evidenced in the fate of *De Ordine Morali*. I then argue that although the Council turns to a spiritual, moral framework as evidenced in *Optatam Totius*, the Council does not set out a clear method in light of this turn and leaves methodological difficulties unresolved. I conclude that post-conciliar moral theology’s

³⁶ David Cloutier and Robert Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary in Catholic Moral Thought,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 2 (2021): 177.

³⁷ Cloutier and Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary,” 160–161.

methodological narrative is more rightly conceived of as a methodological project set out by the Council for moral theology to develop a coherent spiritual method.

Methodological Division in Moral Theology at the Council

In the 1960 *Motu Proprio Superno Dei*, John XXIII established a preparatory commission for theological matters known as the Theological Commission, specifically tasked with thinking through and thoroughly investigating questions regarding Scripture, Tradition, faith, and *morals* (no. 7a, emphasis added). A subcommission drafted a document on morality, *Schema Constitutionis Dogmaticae de Ordine Morali Christiano*, also known as Schema III or *De Ordine Morali*. The history of Schema III is fraught pretty much from start to finish. While still being revised in committee, *De Ordine Morali* received fairly harsh critiques for being overly negative, not biblical enough, and “neglect[ing] or even downplay[ing] the central and formal role of charity in the Christian life.”³⁸ Some of this negative feedback came from the pope himself.³⁹ The schema used a fairly legalistic framework, which the term “moral order” accurately conveys. According to Joseph Komonchak, the text presents moral decisions as “simply matters of deducing particular applications of general laws or principles” and views “the observation of the positive and negative laws laid down by God” as the essence of the moral order.⁴⁰ In its moral methodology, *De Ordine Morali* primarily advocates for applying principles to particular cases, with law acting as the formal criteria for determining and ordering the application of universals to particulars.

De Ordine Morali was sent with six other schemata to the Council Fathers the summer before the official opening of the Council. It was never formally debated, put to a vote, revised, or redrafted.⁴¹ Schema I, *De Fontibus Revelationis*, met with massive criticism from figures as theologically diverse as Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Karol Wojtyła when it was formally debated.⁴²

³⁸ Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council During the Preparation of Vatican II (1960–1962),” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1: *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II toward a New Era in Catholicism*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Orbis Books, 1995), 248.

³⁹ Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council,” 352.

⁴⁰ Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council,” 249.

⁴¹ Klaus Wittstadt, “On the Eve of the Second Vatican Council (July 1–October 10, 1962),” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, 410.

⁴² John W. O’Malley, SJ, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 145. See also Peter Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, vol. 1: *Youth in Nazi Germany to the Second Vatican Council, 1927–1965*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Bloomsbury

John XXIII ultimately called for Schema I to be redrafted more pastorally by a new commission.⁴³ Following this series of events, Schema III essentially became “buried” when it was sent “to be re-‘organized’”; some of the topics and concerns of Schema III were brought under the umbrella of Schema XVII, later Schema XIII, which would become *Gaudium et Spes*.⁴⁴ The Second Vatican Council did not promulgate a document on morals or moral theology. *Gaudium et Spes* addresses key moral concepts like conscience, freedom, law, and human moral life by elucidating the relational and Christological character of the human person, marriage, and social life. It, however, has no explicit discussion of moral theology or moral method in itself. The most explicit statements from the Council on theological method and the discipline of moral theology are from the Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius*.

De Ordine Morali and *Optatam Totius*: Unresolved Methodological Difficulties

Whenever a moral theologian claims that Vatican II calls for a renewal in Catholic moral theology, the subsequent citation is typically *Optatam Totius*, no. 16: “Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology.” How exactly moral theology ought to be perfected and what is wrong with moral theology such that it is in need of perfection are hinted at but not explicitly stated in the decree itself. *Optatam Totius* favors a more Scripture-based, personalist, and Christ-centered approach to moral theology, although it never explicitly rejects a legalist approach or criticizes *De Ordine Morali*. *Optatam Totius* emphasizes the fundamentally spiritual character of theology, asserting that the Bible, “as the soul of all theology,” ought to be read and meditated on daily for the spiritual nourishment of students of theology (no. 16). Note that Sacred Scripture is not merely being appealed to here as a source of theological *content* but as an *activity*, an operation of theological method itself. The instruction is being given for students of theology to *meditate* on Scripture for nourishment and inspiration. The *activity* of meditating on Scripture is being identified as a foundational methodological activity for attuning oneself to God and entering into right relationship with

Continuum, 2020), 367; George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, 1st ed. (Cliff Street, 1999), 161.

⁴³ O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 150; Giuseppe Ruggieri, “The First Doctrinal Clash,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2: *The Formation of the Council's Identity First Period and Intersession (October 1962–September 1963)*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Orbis Books, 1997), 265.

⁴⁴ Jan Grootaers, “The Drama Continues Between Acts,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, 376, n. 36.

oneself and others. This activity of meditating on Scripture, however, does not exist in a vacuum. The decree instructs that “theological disciplines, in the light of faith and under the guidance of the magisterium of the Church, should be so taught that the students will correctly draw out Catholic doctrine from divine revelation” (no. 16).

The decree further underscores the turn to spirituality when it asserts that the “scientific exposition” of moral theology also ought to be “*more* nourished on the *teaching* of the Bible” in order that moral theology “be renewed through a more living contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation” (no. 16). The activity of *meditating* on Scripture is connected to coming into *living contact* with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. This *living contact* appears to be epistemologically significant and morally efficacious insofar as it is *through* this living contact that the decree proposes that the theological disciplines be *renewed*. The vision of renewal and perfecting presented in *Optatam Totius* calls for moral theology to “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).

Post-Conciliar Moral Theology as Ongoing Methodological Task

In direct contrast to the legalist framework of *De Ordine Morali*, *Optatam Totius* advocates a spiritual framework for morality. Although it is easy to harshly judge the Schema III writers and those who argued against this turn at the Council, their “rejection of the efforts to build moral theology on evangelical grounds and spiritual grounds and to give it a more positive and specifically Christian orientation,” has a coherent, rational basis.⁴⁵ Those criticizing the spiritual turn in moral theology at the Council rightly grasped that if a field’s foundational epistemology or formal criteria changes, then so too changes how its cumulative and progressive results are yielded. The fundamental critique of the personalist, Christ-centered, conciliar methodological turn is that it is not clear how one grasps truth in a universally accessible way, adjudicates moral disagreements, or morally evaluates particular cases. Critics say, “These positive orientations often confused moral theology with Christian asceticism.”⁴⁶ They worried that it would result in confusion and a system of moral theology that “would not be helpful to confessors in dealing with concrete cases, and verged on the errors of situation ethics.”⁴⁷ *Optatam Totius* does not provide solutions to these legitimate

⁴⁵ Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council,” 251.

⁴⁶ Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council,” 250.

⁴⁷ Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council,” 250.

questions about how truth and moral evaluation work in this new framework. Nor does it address the critique that such an approach inevitably devolves into moral subjectivism or a spiritualized relativism. Given what happens in Catholic moral theology in the wake of *Humanae Vitae*, this critique has teeth.

The Conciliar turn from a legalist to a spiritual moral framework is not a methodological turn per se. It is more precisely an epistemological turn (and arguably an ontological and anthropological turn) since knowing comes to be characterized as the involvement of the being of the knower in the known, evidenced by its use of *living contact* and *meditating* on Scripture as illuminative. I am *not* claiming that the Second Vatican Council shifts its conception of moral truth but its conception of how the knower comes to know that truth. It shifts from a more traditional epistemological framework to one that conceives knowledge as inherently relational or participatory. This framework is the epistemological inverse of the legalist framework, which requires the knower to know and obey moral law or precepts to be in right relationship with the known. The spiritual approach to moral theology needs further clarification and coherent development of its formal criteria, operations, and ordering as well as how it avoids devolving into moral subjectivism or relativism.

BEYOND TAKING SIDES: VERITATIS SPLENDOR IN NEW LIGHT

I propose a methodological narrative for post-conciliar moral theology that can make sense of “revisionists” and “traditionalists” both claiming to be in continuity with Vatican II and to have the same formal criteria, despite their radical methodological disagreements over the operations of law, conscience, and authority. Post-conciliar moral theology is the very task of developing a coherent moral theological method that is Christ-centered without devolving into moral relativism or returning to legalism. Both revisionist and traditionalist post-conciliar moral theology are better understood as attempts to take up this ongoing task. When situated within this narrative frame, as I will argue, *Veritatis Splendor* is a continuation of this methodological project and a response to how this methodological project has been taken up in post-conciliar moral theology.

Beyond a binary post-conciliar narrative, the methodological purpose and meaning of *Veritatis Splendor* more richly come into view. The story of *Veritatis Splendor* and its reception is, at its core, a story about what it means to do post-conciliar Catholic moral theology, a story that cannot be fully understood apart from the larger narrative of how Vatican II reorients Catholic moral theology away from a legalist framework to a spiritual framework. Two potential pitfalls of this approach to moral theology are a return to legalism or

a turn to moral subjectivism. If viewed simply as taking sides in a contested debate, *Veritatis Splendor*'s key insights are defined out of view since those insights are beyond the binary and respond to difficulties that precede contemporary divisions over law and conscience.

Since an extensive exegesis of *Veritatis Splendor* is beyond the scope of the present article, in this final section, I draw out some of the key methodological insights previously occluded. First, I briefly draw out that *Veritatis Splendor*'s stated purpose is to address methodological division, and it intends to address this division on the level of formal criteria and their foundations. Turning to the first chapter, I argue that *Veritatis Splendor* affirms the Council and addresses the pitfall of legalism through its meditation on Matthew 19 and introduction of "encounter with Christ" as formal criterion for moral theological method. Turning to the second chapter, I argue that *Veritatis Splendor* addresses the pitfall of moral subjectivism as manifest in its treatment of certain post-conciliar methodological trends. Following this, I argue that the third chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* highlights the lives of the saints as sites for a path forward for post-conciliar moral theology beyond the methodological pitfalls a spiritual approach to morality faces.

Purpose of Veritatis Splendor

Veritatis Splendor states that it aims to treat "more fully and more deeply the issues regarding the very foundations of moral theology" (no. 5). To treat the foundation of any discipline is to treat its methodology. It is to treat the basis of its formal criteria, operations, and ordering of operations for achieving insights. The reason the encyclical gives for treating the very foundations of moral method is the emergence of "an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions" (no. 4). As previously discussed, all methodological conflicts ultimately have their basis in ontological, epistemological, or anthropological disagreements or ambiguities and can only be fully adjudicated on that basis.

To clarify what the problem is with these "certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions," *Veritatis Splendor* explains that "at the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth" (no. 4). It is identifying a problem with the way the relationship between truth and human subjectivity is being conceived. Again, intradisciplinary conflict over what it means for the human person to know truth, how the human person comes to know that truth, or how knowing truth, willing good,

and acting virtuously relate to one another are methodological conflicts over formal criteria that ultimately have their basis in conflicts over ontology, epistemology, or anthropology. *Veritatis Splendor*, therefore, in aiming to treat the very foundations of moral theology, addresses moral theological method. It rightly recognizes the source of this methodological division and the proper ground upon which the conflict needs to be adjudicated.

Reaffirming the Council: Encounter with Christ as Basis for a Spiritual Framework

The first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* begins with the activity of meditating on Matthew 19. The overall chapter is framed in terms of the question posed to Jesus by the rich young man: "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" (no. 6). *Veritatis Splendor* begins its meditation on this passage with the words that introduce the rich young man's question: "Someone came to him" (no. 6). Prior to the rich young man asking about the moral life or Jesus giving a reply, the rich young man *comes to* Jesus. It is here, in the meditation on the words "someone came to him," that the encyclical both addresses Vatican II's call for a renewal in moral theology and introduces the term "encounter" (no. 7). According to *Veritatis Splendor*, "In the young man . . . we can recognize every person who, consciously or not, *approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality*" (no. 7). The question of morality "is not so much about rules to be followed," but the full meaning of life and receiving in the Person of Christ "the only response capable of satisfying the human heart" (no. 7). *Veritatis Splendor* is affirming morality as being at its core about the human person and her relationship to God.

Further underscoring this, *Veritatis Splendor* explains that "precisely in this perspective, the Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of moral theology, so that its teaching would display the lofty vocation which the faithful have received in Christ" (no. 7). The encyclical thus both explicitly reaffirms the Council's turn from a legalist to a spiritual framework for moral theology and implicitly reaffirms this turn through its own consonant spiritual description of morality. Following these reaffirmations, *Veritatis Splendor* asserts that "in order to make this 'encounter' with Christ possible, God willed his Church" (no. 7). The term "encounter" is introduced here as a term of art set off by quotation marks used to describe the person's relationship to Christ in its disclosive and fulfilling character.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For philosophical and theological uses of "encounter" like this see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Touchstone, 1996); Romano Guardini, "Europa und Christliche Weltanschauung," in *Stationen und Ruck* (Echter, 1965).

Although *Veritatis Splendor* only uses the term “encounter” at a few key moments over the course of the encyclical, the term nicely distills the overall personalist, Christ-centered post-conciliar method the encyclical begins to articulate and for which it sets the groundwork.

In clarification of why and what is meant by “God willed his Church” to make this encounter with Christ possible, John Paul II quotes *Redemptor Hominis*, asserting that “the Church ‘wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, so that Christ may walk with each person the path of life’” (no. 7). The original context for the quotation is a discussion of union with Christ wherein the Church “sees its fundamental task in enabling that union [with Christ] to be brought about and renewed continually” (*Redemptor Hominis*, no. 13). This tells us that “encounter with Christ” signifies *involvement* in Christ, that is to say a kind of *union* and *relationship* with Christ as opposed to a mere physical meeting or thought. This also tells us that “encounter with Christ” signifies a personal relationship with Christ. It is an ongoing activity of human living, not a one-time thing. The reason why the church sees cultivating this encounter with Christ as its fundamental task is because “following Christ is . . . the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality: just as the people of Israel followed God who led them through the desert towards the Promised Land (Exod 13:21), so every disciple must follow Jesus, towards whom he is drawn by the Father himself (John 6:44)” (no. 19).

Veritatis Splendor conceives of the interdependency of being, knowing, and willing in such a way that Christ “enlightens [the human person’s] intelligence and shapes [her] freedom, leading [her] to know and love” by virtue of her being created and structured self-transcendently (no. 1). For the knower to encounter, follow, and be *involved in Christ* is qualitatively different from the knower being involved in any other known object or subject and as such transforms the knower toward her perfection. The reason for this is that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (no. 2, see John 14:6). *He* is the Light who enlightens all human persons, not facts *about* him, but he himself (no. 1). Again, it is important to note here that *Veritatis Splendor*, like *Optatam Totius*, appears to be operating according to some kind of realist phenomenological or existential epistemology where the knower is involved in a way that impacts her living behavior or way of being in the world rather than sectioned off from the known.

By “*holding fast to the very person of Jesus,*” one becomes illumined (no. 19). *Veritatis Splendor*’s account of “encounter with Christ,” understood as following and holding fast to Jesus, brings together the ontological, epistemological, and anthropological dimensions of moral discernment by asserting that the only true way to know the good to be done and to enact that good is to know and to

be in Christ. Holding fast to the person of Christ in this way is simultaneously an illuminative spiritual practice and the disclosive ordering of formal criteria for moral theology in a spirituality-based framework. Connecting this personalist, Christ-centered method to law, *Veritatis Splendor* asserts that those who live or “walk by the Spirit . . . find in God’s Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out” (no. 18). In contrast, those “who live ‘by the flesh’ experience God’s law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom” (no. 18).

By setting forth obedience to law as a responsive activity of love, there is an attempt here by *Veritatis Splendor* to deal with the critique set out by those who favored a legalist framework. Law and obedience to law is born out of the spiritually and epistemologically transformative activity of being in an ever-deepening relationship with the person of Christ. True obedience to law in its richest and most complete sense is not the fulfillment of an imposed obligation or an action executed out of fear of punishment but a freely chosen corresponding response to the activity of loving and being loved. *Veritatis Splendor* is making the point that without the orientation and illumination of Christ, the *Logos*, how we experience and understand reality is defective (no. 18). Likewise, if our will does not coincide with Christ’s, not only is it defective but our defective will then leaves us, like the rich young man, sorrowful, unfulfilled, and drawing away from love of God and love of neighbor.

Taking the Problem of Moral Evaluation Within a Spiritual Framework Seriously

After having dealt with the pitfall of returning to a pre-conciliar legalist approach in the first chapter by affirming the Conciliar turn to spirituality and posing “encounter with Christ” as the basis for a personalist, Christ-centered, and Scripture-based method for that approach, the second chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* turns to methodological tendencies in post-conciliar moral theology. Because of these post-conciliar developments, *Veritatis Splendor* asserts that “in order to ‘reverently preserve and faithfully expound’ the word of God, the Magisterium has the duty to state that some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations are incompatible with revealed truth” (no. 29). What are these trends in theological thinking deemed incompatible with revealed truth?

Veritatis Splendor specifies that these “tendencies in contemporary moral theology, under the influence of the currents of *subjectivism* and *individualism* just mentioned, involve novel interpretations of the relationship of freedom to the moral law, human nature, and

conscience, and propose *novel criteria* for the moral evaluation of acts” (no. 34, emphasis added). In my view, these tendencies are related to difficulties left unresolved by the Council and that, in the encyclical’s view, have hit a critical point in need of discernment. What *Veritatis Splendor*, therefore, understands itself to be doing in the second chapter is correcting and intervening in post-conciliar methodological proposals that (whether by way of formal criteria, operation, or ordering of operations) fall prey to subjectivism and individualism or relativism.⁴⁹ Unlike the legalist moral theologians at Vatican II, *Veritatis Splendor* does not see the potential for or reality of moral method and its operations devolving into subjectivism as a reason to reject a spiritual framework for morality altogether.

Veritatis Splendor makes a point to say that “to undertake a critical discernment of these tendencies—a discernment capable of acknowledging what is legitimate, useful, and of value in them, while at the same time pointing out their ambiguities, dangers, and errors—we must examine them in the light of the fundamental dependence of freedom upon truth” (no. 34). This is why I say correcting and intervening in the theological conversation rather than rejecting altogether. *Veritatis Splendor* strives to discern what is legitimate in post-conciliar methodological developments given the warrants of Vatican II and what is illegitimate or insufficiently described in them, given the ontological, epistemological, and anthropological limits set out by divine revelation. This is why, in each of the four sections of chapter two, we see some recognition and complement of the good that a methodological theory or proposal about to be critiqued for some instantiation of subjectivism is attempting to protect or in which it has its basis.

For instance, in the second section, “Conscience and Truth,” *Veritatis Splendor* affirms *Gaudium et Spes*’s description of conscience as “always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can, when necessary, speak to his heart more specifically” (no. 54, see *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16). Earlier in the chapter, *Veritatis Splendor* recognizes that “this heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and of his or her uniqueness, and of the respect due to the journey of conscience, certainly represents one of the positive achievements of modern culture” (no. 31). That being said, the encyclical critiquing a subjectivist conception of conscience argues “it is the ‘heart’ converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of *true* judgments of conscience”

⁴⁹ To assess whether *Veritatis Splendor*’s critiques of specific tendencies in moral theology are accurate depictions of a specific theologian’s exact argumentation is beyond the scope of this article. I am simply demonstrating that the target of the chapter is subjectivism.

such that “in order to ‘prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,’ knowledge of God’s law in general is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient: what is essential is a sort of ‘connaturality’ between man and the true good” (no. 64). *Veritatis Splendor* recognizes the radical significance and necessity of conscience and law to morality, but nonetheless asserts that although necessary, they are insufficient without a connaturality between the human person and the One who is Good, Jesus Christ.

Likewise, in the third section, “Fundamental Choice,” *Veritatis Splendor* recognizes that “it has been rightly pointed out that freedom is not only the choice for one or another particular action. . . . Emphasis has rightly been placed on the importance of certain choices which ‘shape’ a person’s entire moral life” (no. 65). The encyclical continues its affirmations, writing, “There is no doubt that Christian moral teaching, even in its Biblical roots, acknowledges the specific importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God” (no. 66). *Veritatis Splendor* further explains that “this faith, which works through love, comes from the core of man, from his ‘heart,’ whence it is called to bear fruit in works” such that “in the Decalogue one finds, as an introduction to the various commandments, the basic clause: ‘I am the Lord your God...’” (no. 66). Therefore, although *Veritatis Splendor* strongly critiques fundamental option theory for separating the transcendental and the categorial, it nevertheless emphasizes more so than any of the other theories being critiqued the profound insight that a fundamental choice is at the basis of the Christian moral life (no. 65). What, however, is of decisive significance for *Veritatis Splendor* is that this fundamental choice is the choice to follow Jesus, inseparable from temporal acts (no. 66).

More than Exemplars: The Martyrs, Saints, and Mary as Revelatory of the Path Forward

The third and final chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* sets out its purpose as being to “in a positive way . . . help all the faithful to form a moral conscience which will make judgments and lead to decisions in accordance with the truth” (no. 85). Like the first chapter, here *Veritatis Splendor* once again reaffirms and further emphasizes the need for Christian morality and, thereby, moral theology to be conceived of in a spiritual framework. Connecting faith to encounter with Christ, *Veritatis Splendor* asserts, “Faith is a decision involving one’s whole existence. It is an *encounter*, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (no. 88, emphasis added). This faith, this encounter with Christ, “possesses a moral content” (no. 89). *Veritatis*

Splendor insists that “it is urgent” for Christians to “rediscover the newness of the faith and its power to judge” since without this “faith is weakened and loses its character as a new and original criterion for thinking and acting in personal, family, and social life” (no. 88). Faith is “not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent” but an encounter with the living God that directly impacts the way one lives everyday life (no. 88).

The substantive addition to this final chapter is the incorporation of the meaning of those disciples who hold fast to the person of Jesus for the other people whom Jesus calls. It is ultimately *Veritatis Splendor*’s contention that “the proper place which *continuing theological reflection about the moral life* holds in the Church” is “in the living context of this new evangelization, aimed at generating and nourishing ‘the faith which works through love’ and in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit” (no. 108). This new evangelization “involves the proclamation and presentation of morality” such that it “will show its authenticity and unleash all its missionary force when carried out through the gift not only of the word proclaimed but also of the word lived” (no. 107). *Veritatis Splendor* culminates in a discussion of the martyrs and concludes with a prayer to Mary because “through the moral life, faith becomes ‘confession,’ not only before God but also before men: it becomes *witness*” (no. 89). This witness when encountered by other human persons parallel to the encounter with Christ is illuminative. As *Veritatis Splendor* notes, Christ does not only say, “I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12, see VS, no. 1) but also says to his disciples, “‘You are the light of the world’” (no. 89, see Matt 5:14–16). The faith that becomes witness to other persons is not only a model or example of what a good life looks like but, more fundamentally, when encountered, an illuminative disclosure of truth and the meaning of reality that directs others to Christ and his loving encounter.

CONCLUSION: ENCOUNTER AS THE HEART OF METHOD AND LIGHT OF FAITH

The Second Vatican Council, while (re)turning to a more spiritual approach to moral theology, does not set out a clear *method* for the discipline within this new paradigm. It leaves methodological difficulties raised at the Council about this new approach unresolved. The Council ultimately leaves the question of how to do moral theology open and, thereby, leaves post-conciliar moral theology with the task of figuring out how to do moral theology according to this new paradigm. Post-conciliar moral theology on this reading is the methodological project of figuring out how to do moral theology in a way that fully incorporates Scripture, virtue, historicity, sociality, the

human person, and a relationship with Christ into moral evaluation without devolving into moral subjectivism or relativism and without returning to a pre-conciliar legalist ethical method for moral evaluation. In my view, *Veritatis Splendor* is a response to this methodological task. When read in this light, *Veritatis Splendor* presents fruitful insights that reaffirm the vision of the Council against the pitfall of returning to legalism and deepen its vision against the pitfall of devolving into subjectivism or relativism.

Reading post-conciliar moral theology and *Veritatis Splendor* within a methodological law-conscience binary narrative leaves contemporary moral theology impoverished. It fails to acknowledge the unresolved methodological divisions at the Second Vatican Council, the underlying methodological agreement present in post-conciliar moral theology, and the potential resources *Veritatis Splendor* offers to those contemporary divisions. Reading *Veritatis Splendor* beyond a methodological binary narrative recognizes a larger horizon and deeper methodological narrative in which the contemporary methodological divisions themselves are embedded and according to which *Veritatis Splendor* is more fruitfully read. *Veritatis Splendor* returns to the original conciliar question of morality, spirituality, and law. *Veritatis Splendor's* account of *encounter with Christ* understood as following and holding fast to the Person of Jesus, brings together the ontological, epistemological, and anthropological dimensions of moral discernment by asserting that the only true way to know the good to be done and enact that good is through encounter with Christ, the Incarnate Logos.

Through the concept of “encounter with Christ” and its emphasis on the illuminative power of the saints and martyrs, *Veritatis Splendor* plants seeds for the development of a method consistent with the methodological task set out by the Second Vatican Council, built from a foundational point of methodological continuity between “revisionists” and “traditionalists,” and responds to unresolved methodological concerns from the Council. *Veritatis Splendor's* insight that encounter with Christ is the hermeneutical key or formal criteria for the good life and human moral judgment is a decisive positive contribution to contemporary Catholic moral theology and post-conciliar moral theological method. *Veritatis Splendor* responds to the constructive methodological project the Second Vatican Council sets in motion. Its insight is that Catholic moral method and action theory must be grounded in the very being of the human person and the fact that God is a living God who dwells with us and in us, giving us new eyes and new hearts. This insight has already begun to flower in the work of John Paul II's successors, who affirm: “‘Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and

a decisive direction”” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 7; see *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1). These are not merely tender pious words but a roadmap for post-conciliar moral theology and the Christian moral life. They are a roadmap for a method grounded in a personalist and existential epistemology in which reality is only truly known when it is rightly felt and responded to according to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. **M**

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