

The Pastoral Conversion of Moral Theology and “The Perspective of the Acting Person” in *Veritatis Splendor*

Matthew Kuhner

Abstract: This article considers the Second Vatican Council’s trajectory of pastoral renewal in the church, specifically in its application to moral theology. In particular, Part I summarizes Pope Francis’s reflections on moral theology throughout the first 11 years of his pontificate, attempting to articulate the contours of his vision of an “evangelical morality.” This analysis reveals how Francis’s vision represents a response to the Council’s call for renewal in moral theology, inasmuch as it engages the integration of theology and pastoral action by foregrounding mercy “as the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth.” After this work of serene analysis, Part II considers how *Veritatis Splendor*—especially its second chapter—relates to the Council’s pastoral trajectory. It is argued that John Paul II’s encyclical does not stand outside the aforementioned trajectory of pastoral renewal, but rather makes an essential contribution to it, not only (as is usually suggested) because it made great strides in recovering a Christological and biblical context for moral reflection, but also because its contributions to moral action theory reflect, with scientific accuracy, the foundation required for a pastoral conversion of moral theology to take root and bear fruit. *Veritatis Splendor* provides what might be called a *pastoral action theory*, driven by the trajectory of pastoral renewal and evangelization called for by the Second Vatican Council and constituting the account of moral action necessary for Francis’s vision of an “evangelical morality.”

IN ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE MOMENTS OF RECENT ECCLESIAL history, John XXIII set forth an epoch-making charter for the Second Vatican Council:¹

¹ This article is indebted to the attendees of the conference, “Human Action and the Drama of Accompaniment: The 30th Anniversary of *Veritatis Splendor*,” hosted by St. Bernard’s School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester, NY, many of whom offered insightful comments and critiques concerning an early version of this argument. Likewise, the article was significantly improved because of the excellent feedback offered by the anonymous reviewers and guest editors of the *Journal of Moral Theology*.

What is needed, and what everyone imbued with a truly Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit craves today, is that [the church's] doctrine shall be more widely known, more deeply understood, and more penetrating in its effects on men's moral lives. What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honored teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else. This, then, is what will require our careful, and perhaps too our patient, consideration. We must work out ways and means of expounding these truths in a manner more consistent with a predominantly pastoral view of the Church's teaching office.²

While this section of the Pope's opening address is frequently discussed in academic writing on the Council, its emphasis on morality is less observed. John XXIII is clear that a key concern within a "predominantly pastoral view of the Church's teaching office" is that doctrine will be "more penetrating in its effects on men's *moral* lives."³ It is from these remarks that the conciliar and postconciliar emphasis on evangelization is born,⁴ which does not concern the proclamation of the Gospel only but, as Paul VI writes, always elicits in the hearer "a genuine adherence . . . an adherence to a program of life—a life henceforth transformed—which [the Lord] proposes."⁵

² John XXIII, "Solemn Opening of the Second Vatican Council," Thursday, October 11, 1962, no. 6.5.

³ Emphasis added. It is worth noting that the "*Pastoral* Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (emphasis added), *Gaudium et Spes*, speaks frequently about moral action: "moral/morality" is used over two dozen times throughout the document.

⁴ See Paul VI's great Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, an extended reflection on the nature and the demands of evangelization, intentionally promulgated on the tenth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. In observing this anniversary, Paul VI suggests that "the objectives [of the Second Vatican Council] are definitively summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century" (no. 2).

⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 23. See also *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 23: "In a word, adherence to the kingdom, that is to say, to the 'new world,' to the new state of things, to the new manner of being, of living, of living in community, which the Gospel inaugurates. Such an adherence, which cannot remain abstract and unincarnated, reveals itself concretely by a visible entry into a community of believers. Thus those whose life has been transformed enter a community which is itself a sign of transformation, a sign of newness of life: it is the Church, the visible sacrament of salvation." John Paul II picks up this trajectory likewise in *Veritatis Splendor*, suggesting that "the new evangelization will show its authenticity and unleash all its missionary force when it is carried out through the gift not only of the word proclaimed but also of the word lived" (no. 107).

During the Council, *Optatam Totius*, the Decree on Priestly Training, provided an initial statement concerning how the pastoral vision of the church's teaching office should unfold within moral theology per se:

Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should 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. 6)

This lapidary statement demarcates the challenge of renewal: even the "scientific exposition" of moral theology must be for the sake of "bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world."

Francis's pontificate has offered a unique synthesis of reflection on evangelization, pastoral action, and moral theology, allowing these conciliar and post-conciliar themes to converge in new ways. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis quite famously called for ecclesial renewal in language that echoes the conciliar address of John XXIII:

I dream of a "missionary option," that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by *pastoral conversion* can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. (no. 27, emphasis added)

This "pastoral conversion" of the church appears to arise from the same fundamental impulse as John XXIII's call for a "predominantly pastoral view of the Church's teaching office." Likewise, just as *Optatam Totius* sought to challenge moral theology in light of that pastoral view, so also Francis has called for the continued renewal of moral theology, precisely by way of a "pastoral conversion" of moral theology, or as he puts it, "evangelical morality."⁶

This article will reflect upon the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on evangelization and pastoral action, specifically in application to moral theology. Part One considers Francis's reflections

⁶ Pope Francis, "Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Teologia Morale, Promosso dalla Pontificia Università Gregoriana e dal Pontificio Istituto Teologico Giovanni Paolo II per le Scienze del Matrimonio e della Famiglia," May 13, 2022.

on moral theology throughout the first eleven years of his pontificate, attempting to articulate the contours of his vision of an “evangelical morality.” Such an analysis will reveal how Francis’s vision represents a response to the Council’s call for renewal in moral theology, inasmuch as it engages the integration of theology and pastoral action by foregrounding mercy as “the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth.”⁷ After this work of more serene analysis, Part II considers how *Veritatis Splendor*—especially its second chapter—relates to the Council’s pastoral trajectory. Here I will suggest that John Paul II’s encyclical does not stand outside the aforementioned trajectory of pastoral renewal, but rather makes an essential contribution to it, not only (as is usually suggested) because it made great strides in recovering a Christological and biblical context for moral reflection, but also because its contributions to moral action theory reflect, with scientific accuracy, the foundation required for a pastoral conversion of moral theology to take root and bear fruit. I will suggest, then, that *Veritatis Splendor* provides what might be called a pastoral action theory, driven by the trajectory of pastoral renewal and evangelization called for by the Second Vatican Council and constituting the account of moral action necessary for Francis’s vision of an “evangelical morality.”

FRANCIS: “EVANGELICAL MORALITY” AND MERCY AS THE “RADIANT MANIFESTATION OF TRUTH”

Taking into account the major documents of his pontificate, as well as several key addresses and audiences, I will articulate Francis’s vision of “evangelical morality” in summary form. In order to do so, I highlight two observable features of “evangelical morality” ultimately and inseparably united by the theological principle standing at the center of his vision, namely, *mercy*.⁸

The first observable feature of Francis’s vision of “evangelical morality” is the persistent description of the church’s moral teaching as a *response* to the love of God. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis writes:

Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to

⁷ *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 311.

⁸ In what follows, I greatly benefited from two excellent articles that provide distinct but complementary summaries of Francis’s vision of moral theology: Cathleen Kaveny, “Francis and Healthcare Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2019): 186–201, esp. 187–193; Alessandro Rovati, “Mercy is a Person: Francis and the Christological Turn in Moral Theology,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 48–69.

seek the good of others. Under no circumstance can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church's moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options. The message will run the risk of losing its freshness and will cease to have "the fragrance of the Gospel." (no. 11)

These words come at the conclusion of a section titled, "From the Heart of the Gospel," wherein Francis observes the demands of communicating the Gospel message. Perhaps the most pressing demand for authentic proclamation today, according to the Apostolic Exhortation, is the consideration of the "integrity of the Gospel message" (no. 39), which presupposes "a fitting sense of proportion" in the art of proclamation (no. 38), while nevertheless permitting all the truths of the faith and the virtues to illuminate one another. Only in this way can the Gospel message avoid deformation (no. 39). To this extent, it would be a mistake to be concerned with the integrity of the church's moral teachings apart from the integrity of the Gospel as such; moral teaching is *always* a response of love to God's loving invitation, and moral discourse should "radiate" this fact. For Francis, this is why moral teaching cannot be something distinct from the Gospel as a whole and its proclamation; but it also accounts for why moral teaching is so important: the church's moral teachings are indeed invitations to love, invitations to respond to the unexpected and overwhelming love of God.⁹ The following sentence from *Amoris Laetitia* summarizes this line of reflection:

The teaching of moral theology should not fail to incorporate these considerations [i.e., the necessity of mercy], for although it is quite true that concern must be shown for the integrity of the Church's moral teaching, special care should always be shown to emphasize and encourage the highest and most central values of the Gospel, particularly the primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God's love. (no. 311)

⁹ The vision relayed here is one of the most remarkable and central threads of *Veritatis Splendor*. See Part II for further discussion of this point. An echo of this can also be heard in the likewise famous sentence of Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*: "Being 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" (no. 1, emphasis added). Christian identity does not result from an ethical choice; the ethical choice arises as a response to the encounter with Christ.

The understanding of morality as a response to God's love appears to be the most significant context for Francis's consistent and tenacious opposition to a casuistic morality, which he says characterized his own early studies. In his own account, a casuistic morality represents a "cold morality, a theoretical morality,"¹⁰ which takes up the study of cases and determines "up to this point it is possible, up to this point it is not possible, from here yes, from here no,"¹¹ and thereby loses the integrity of the Gospel message. Cathleen Kaveny has shown, quite convincingly, that casuistry in its most basic meaning ("the practice of discernment about what to do in particular situations") can be done in a manner consistent with Francis's vision of discernment and pastoral conversion.¹² Kaveny helps highlight that the essential drive of Francis's statements criticizing a "casuistic morality" indicates a relationship of opposition with his understanding of an "evangelical morality": the love of God, and our loving response, must always constitute the basis of moral teaching in the church, as is required by a total dedication to evangelization. Should casuistical sophistry become the overarching frame for moral discourse—the manipulation of law in favor of freedom, or freedom in favor of law—then the role of moral teaching in the context of the Gospel is lost. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger echoes the same point, which highlights well the crux of Francis's opposition to casuistry: "The older type of moral theology no longer allowed people to see the great message of liberation and freedom given to us in the encounter with Christ. Rather, it stressed above all the negative aspect of so many prohibitions, so many 'no's. These are no doubt present in Catholic ethics, but they were no longer presented for what they really are: the concretization of a great 'yes.'"¹³

If the first observable feature of Francis's vision of "evangelical morality" is its character as a *response to* God's love, the second observable feature is the necessity of proclaiming the church's moral teaching *in* love. If others are to be invited to take up a response to the love of God through charity and virtue, it is necessary for those mediating this invitation to accompany others precisely *in* love, espousing "a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, aimed at understanding, forgiving, accompanying, and above all, integrating"

¹⁰ Pope Francis, "Address to Participants in the Conference Promoted by the Alphonsian Academy," March 23, 2023.

¹¹ Pope Francis, "Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Teologia Morale," May 13, 2022.

¹² "A Defense of Casuistry," *Commonweal* 150, no. 1 (January 2023), www.commonwealmagazine.org/casuistry-pope-francis-morality-theology-thomism-kaveny.

¹³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis Splendor*," in *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, vol. 1: *The Unity of the Church* (Eerdmans, 2010), 184.

(*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 312). The practical demands of this model of proclamation—thoroughly imbued with the “pastoral conversion” called for above—were articulated well in an address Francis made ten years after *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Every moral-theological proposal has, in the final analysis, this foundation: the love of God is our guide, the guide of our personal choices and our existential journey. As a consequence, moral theologians, missionaries, and confessors are required to enter into a living relationship with the People of God, engaging in particular with the cry of the least, to understand their real difficulties, to look at existence from their perspective, and to offer them answers that reflect the light of the eternal love of the Father.¹⁴

Notice that, in this description, the identification of the church’s moral teaching as a response to God’s love is presupposed; the primary emphasis here is upon the one mediating the proposal of the church’s moral teaching. If the one receiving the proposal is to understand that moral action is a response to the love of God, then the one proposing that teaching should “reflect the light of the eternal love of the Father” precisely *in* the proposal itself.

For Francis, St. Alphonsus is the greatest model of this feature of “evangelical morality.” Francis has consistently highlighted this Doctor of the Church and patron saint of moral theologians throughout his papacy, following in the steps of John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini* (“On the Bicentenary of the Death of St. Alphonsus de Liguori”). In particular, Francis notes that Alphonsus made the decision “to place himself at the service of consciences that sought, even amid a thousand difficulties, the right thing to do, faithful to God’s call to holiness.”¹⁵ Because he was a man for others, who saw the need to invite people to encounter the love of God precisely in his own witness of love for them, Alphonsus “was neither lax nor strict. He was a realist in the true Christian sense, because he understood clearly that ‘at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and

¹⁴ Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the Conference Promoted by the Alphonsian Academy,” March 23, 2023. See also *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 307–312, and *Misericordiae Vultus*, especially no. 12: “The Church’s first truth is the love of Christ. The Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of oneself. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations, and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.”

¹⁵ Pope Francis, “Message to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori *Doctor Ecclesiae*,” March 23, 2021.

engagement with others.”¹⁶ In this sense, we must follow Alphonsus, who “offered constructive answers to the challenges of the society of his time, through popular evangelization, indicating a style of moral theology capable of holding together the need for the Gospel and human fragility.”¹⁷ Ultimately, such “true fraternity” with others—who stand in such need of the Gospel of God’s love, including its encouragement to virtuous living as a response of love to God—is only possible because God exhibits such fraternity first. As Francis writes,

I invite moral theologians, missionaries, and confessors to enter into a living relationship with the people of God, and to look at existence from their angle, to understand the real difficulties they encounter and to help heal wounds, because only true fraternity is “capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does.”¹⁸

In an Alphonsian key, Francis recalls this point in discussing the proclamation of the church’s teaching on the family: “The radiation of this divine plan [for the family], in the complexity of today’s condition, requires a special intelligence of love, as well as a strong evangelical dedication, animated by great compassion and mercy for the vulnerability and fallibility of love between human beings.”¹⁹ Such an “intelligence of love” strives to intelligently put forward the

¹⁶ Pope Francis, “Message to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori *Doctor Ecclesiae*,” March 23, 2021. See also John Paul II, *Spiritus Domini*: “Alphonsus was responsible for the renewal of moral theology; through contact with the people he encountered in the confessional, especially during his missionary preaching, he gradually and with much hard work brought about a change in his mentality, progressively achieving a correct balance between rigorism and liberty.”

¹⁷ Pope Francis, “Message to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori *Doctor Ecclesiae*,” March 23, 2021. See also Francis, “Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the ‘Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina’ for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology,” March 3, 2015: “Even good theologians, like good shepherds, have the odor of the people and of the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine onto the wounds of mankind.”

¹⁸ Pope Francis, “Message to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori *Doctor Ecclesiae*,” March 23, 2021, quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 92.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, “Discorso alla Comunità Accademica del Pontificio Istituto ‘Giovanni Paolo II’ per Studi su Matrimonio e Famiglia,” October 27, 2016, no. 3.

Gospel, led all the while by love of those persons receiving the proclamation.²⁰

On this point, it is worth observing that these two features of Francis's vision of "evangelical morality"—as a response to love and a proclamation *in* love—do not necessarily reduce or blunt the intellectual rigor required by moral theology. Rather, as Francis notes in an address to an Alphonsian Academy conference, "The Church expects from the Pontifical Alphonsian Academy that it will be able to reconcile scientific rigor and closeness to the holy faithful People of God, that it will give concrete answers to real problems, that it will accompany and formulate humane moral proposals, attentive to the salvific Truth and the good of people."²¹ For Francis, "evangelical morality" does not so much require the *extension* of scientific moral theology to something other than its primary object of study and reflection, as much as it requires the *recognition in fact* of a "virtuous circularity" between theology and pastoral action: "Pastoral practice cannot be deduced from abstract theological principles, just as theological reflection cannot limit itself to reiterating the practice."²² Rather, "Theology and pastoral care go together. A theological doctrine that does not allow itself to be oriented and shaped by the evangelizing purpose and pastoral care of the Church is equally unthinkable as a pastoral care of the Church that does not know how to treasure revelation and its tradition with a view to better understanding and transmission of the faith."²³ Within Francis's vision, this "virtuous circularity" is related to that "special intelligence of love" noted above: "You learn so as to live: theology and holiness

²⁰ Francis's discussion of an "intelligence of love" was echoed in an address concerning theological method: "Benedict XVI rightly asked all sciences to widen the boundaries of scientific rationality in a sapiential sense. This widening also needs to take place in theology, so that it can be a discipline critical for the life of every human being and the entire People of God, uniting science and virtue, critical reasoning and love. Catholic faith is a faith that works through charity: otherwise it is a dead faith (cf. James 2:26). A sapiential theology is thus a theology of love, because 'whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love' (1 John 4:8)" ("Greeting to the Members of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology," May 10, 2024).

²¹ Pope Francis, "Address to Participants in the Conference Promoted by the Alphonsian Academy," March 23, 2023. It is worth noting how similar this formulation is to one of the central assertions of Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "Fidelity both to a message whose servants we are and to the people to whom we must transmit it living and intact is the central axis of evangelization" (no. 4).

²² Pope Francis, "Discorso ai Partecipanti al Convegno Internazionale di Teologia Morale," May 13, 2022.

²³ Pope Francis, "Discorso alla Comunità Accademica del Pontificio Istituto 'Giovanni Paolo II' per Studi su Matrimonio e Famiglia," October 27, 2016, no. 5.

are inseparable.”²⁴ Practically speaking, this suggests once again that “teaching and studying theology means living on a frontier, one in which the Gospel meets the needs of the people to whom it should be proclaimed in an understandable and meaningful way.”²⁵

For Francis, just as “evangelical morality” does not signal an abandonment of scientific rigor, it also does not suggest an adaptation or gradualness of the law in order to make the “frontier life” of moral theology possible in practice.²⁶ Rather, the “virtuous circularity” between theology and pastoral action is again, a recognition of fact; it is the observation of a *polar* relationship that cannot be understood according to an *antagonistic* or a *displacive* understanding, wherein theology and pastoral action stand in opposition to one another or ultimately displace each other.²⁷ This is why, as *Amoris Laetitia* relates, “A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal [God’s plan for marriage in all its grandeur] would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel *and also of love on*

²⁴ Pope Francis, “Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the ‘Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina,’” March 3, 2015.

²⁵ Pope Francis, “Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the ‘Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina,’” March 3, 2015. See also Francis, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, no. 7: “Wisdom holds Truth and Charity together internally in a ‘solid circle,’ so that it is impossible to know the truth without practicing charity.”

²⁶ See *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 295: “Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called ‘law of gradualness’ in the knowledge that the human being knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth.’ This is not a ‘gradualness of law’ but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. For the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace, even though each human being ‘advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of God’s definitive and absolute love in his or her entire personal and social life.’”

²⁷ For a discussion concerning what might be considered an antagonistic or displacive understanding of theology and pastoral action, see William P. George, “Moral Statement and Pastoral Adaptation: A Problematic Distinction in McCormick’s Theological Ethics,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 12 (1992): 135–156. See especially the emblematic story relayed on 154–155: “James Gustafson, in conversation with his students, has occasionally told of lively discussions years ago with Paul Ramsey and Bernard Häring. Ramsey and Gustafson would be at odds over a particular case and Häring would offer a clarifying comment: ‘well, Ramsey’s right morally, but Gustafson’s right pastorally.’ To which Gustafson would reply, ‘if I’m right pastorally, then why am I not right morally?’” Indeed, the unsatisfactory nature of Häring’s comment is noted well by Gustafson, and George’s article supports Gustafson’s response with significant theological reflection that requires careful consideration (though I am not in agreement with his proposed vision of the relationship between ethics and pastoral action, which seems to me to displace ethics [teachings, principles, etc.] with pastoral action). Francis’s polar vision seems to intentionally avoid such an approach, with a much more organic vision of the polar relationship between moral theology and the demands of pastoral action.

the part of the Church for young people themselves” (no. 306, emphasis added). This statement constitutes the foundation for the section themed “The Logic of Pastoral Mercy,” paragraphs 307 to 312. The circularity of the “logic of pastoral mercy” means that a lack of fidelity to the Gospel is a lack of love for young people; likewise, a lack of love for young people is a lack of fidelity to the Gospel. Thus, when it comes to the pastoral discernment of particular cases, Francis suggests in *Amoris Laetitia* that “this [pastoral] discernment [of particular cases] can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity as proposed by the Church”; to the contrary, it is actually the case that, “for this discernment to happen, the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion, and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it” (no. 300).²⁸ To give anything less than the grandeur of the Gospel is a failure to love; to fail to love human persons, especially in their failures and their fragility, is a failure to be faithful to the Gospel message.²⁹

For Francis, all that has been said here erupts from and is held together by “the beating heart of the Gospel” (no. 309): mercy.³⁰ The

²⁸ Francis quotes *Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 12. See also *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 297: “Naturally, if someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others; this is a case of something which separates from the community (cf. Matt 18:17). Such a person needs to listen once more to the Gospel message and its call to conversion.”

²⁹ See *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 311: “At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel.” For further discussion of how Francis’s vision of “evangelical morality” in no way promotes laxism, see David Cloutier, “Moral Theology in Service of the Work of the Spirit: Synthesizing Pinckaers and Francis Against Moralities of Obligation,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, no. 2 (2019): 13–30, especially 21ff.

³⁰ Francis’s emphasis on mercy reflects a broader development in the church over the past 150 years that has foregrounded divine mercy in a radical way. Benedict XVI discussed this trajectory in a rare interview given in 2015: “For me it is a ‘sign of the times,’ the fact that the idea of the mercy of God should become more and more central and dominant—starting from Sister Faustina, whose visions in various ways reflect deeply the image of God held by the men of today and their desire for the divine goodness. John Paul II was deeply impregnated by this impulse, even if this did not always emerge explicitly. But it is certainly not by chance that his last book, published just before his death, speaks of God’s mercy. Starting from the experiences which, from the earliest years of life, exposed him to all of the cruel acts men can perform, he affirms that mercy is the only true and ultimate effective reaction against the power of evil. Only where there is mercy does cruelty end, only with mercy do evil and violence end. Francis is totally in agreement with this line. His pastoral practice is expressed in the fact that he continually speaks to us of God’s mercy. It is mercy that moves us toward God, while justice frightens us before Him. In my view,

two observable features of “evangelical morality”—a response to God’s love and the proclamation of moral teaching *in* love—as well as the “virtuous circle” of theology and pastoral action it presupposes, are held together by the fact that “mercy is not just a pastoral attitude but it is the very substance of the Gospel of Jesus.”³¹ Mercy is precisely the *substance* of the Gospel and the church’s teaching, *and* the shape of all pastoral action, converging in the person of Jesus Christ. Elsewhere he writes: “Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. . . . Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God. . . . The Church is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it as the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, nos. 1, 25). “Evangelical morality,” then, is not simply a response to God’s love generally, but a specific response to his mercy: “Christian morality is a response, it is the heartfelt response before the surprising, unforeseeable—even ‘unfair’ according to human criteria—mercy of One who knows me, knows my betrayals and loves me just the same, appreciates me, embraces me, calls me anew, hopes in me, has expectations of me.”³² Likewise, “evangelical morality” proposes the Church’s teachings in love precisely because the experience of mercy in every proclamation of the Gospel message is precisely an experience of the very content of the message: (divine) mercy is believable because I have experienced mercy (in this missionary disciple). As Francis relates in *Misericordiae Vultus*, “Mercy is not

this makes clear that, under a veneer of self-assuredness and self-righteousness, the man of today hides a deep knowledge of his wounds and his unworthiness before God. He is waiting for mercy” (www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/33591/full-text-of-benedict-xvis-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview). In addition to the developments mentioned by Benedict, it is worth noting the memorable words of John XXIII in his opening address of the Second Vatican Council: “The Church has always opposed . . . errors, and often condemned them with the utmost severity. Today, however, Christ’s Bride prefers the balm of mercy to the arm of severity. She believes that present needs are best served by explaining more fully the purport of her doctrines, rather than by publishing condemnations.” See also Kaveny, “Francis and Catholic Healthcare Ethics,” 189–190. See also Rovati, “Mercy is a Person: Francis and the Christological Turn in Moral Theology,” 58ff.

³¹ Pope Francis, “Letter to the Grand Chancellor of the ‘Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina,’” March 3, 2015. See Rovati, “Mercy is a Person,” 64: “For the Pope, pastoral care is nothing else than seeing things with the eyes of Christ, imitating him who ‘goes out to everyone without exception.’ This is why any attempt to pit doctrinal and pastoral considerations against each other ought to be rejected for, as Francis beautifully said, ‘Christian doctrine is called Jesus Christ.’”

³² Pope Francis, “Address to the Communion and Liberation Movement,” March 7, 2015. See also *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 311: “We should always consider ‘inadequate any theological conception which in the end puts in doubt the omnipotence of God and, especially, his mercy.’”

only the working of the Father; it becomes a criterion for knowing who his true children are. In a word, we are called to show mercy because mercy was first shown to us" (no. 9).³³

A pitting of mercy against justice and justice against mercy (in God and the church) would certainly cause this vision of "evangelical morality" to break down into an irreconcilable tension between proclamation of church teaching and personal accompaniment. For Francis, however, "Mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth" (no. 311). In *Misericordiae Vultus*, he notes: "God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice" (no. 21). God's mercy, his divine love that pursues us and stoops to pick us up and heal us, is thus that hidden center uniting those two observable features of "evangelical morality," and the centripetal force that makes possible the "virtuous circle" of theology and pastoral action it requires.

VERITATIS SPLENDOR, "THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ACTING PERSON," AND PASTORAL ACTION THEORY

Part I of this paper attempted to unfold Francis's vision of "evangelical morality," suggesting that it proposes a vision of moral theology steeped in the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on evangelization and pastoral action. I now turn to John Paul II's landmark encyclical on moral teaching, *Veritatis Splendor*, to consider how it relates to the trajectory of pastoral renewal and evangelization called for by the Second Vatican Council. It is reasonable to ask whether chapter two of *Veritatis Splendor* in particular represents a move away from the conciliar trajectory of pastoral renewal and evangelization, inasmuch as it offers several negative pronouncements upon certain trends in moral theology. A closer look at the purpose of the encyclical, and then at chapter two itself, offers a modest (and in no way comprehensive) response to this question.

At the outset John Paul II situates *Veritatis Splendor* explicitly within the Conciliar trajectory of renewal indicated by John XXIII and *Optatam Totius*. John Paul II writes,

For the [rich] young man [see Matt 19:16], the *question* is not so much about rules to be followed, but *about the full meaning of life*. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion. This question is ultimately an appeal to the absolute Good

³³ See further Alessandro Rovati, "Mercy is a Person," 62: "We can be witnesses of mercy for the world because the Lord has looked upon us with mercy."

which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life. Precisely in this perspective the Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of moral theology, so that its teaching would display the lofty vocation which the faithful have received in Christ, the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart. (no. 7)³⁴

This emphasis on the "full meaning of life" and "the desire of the human heart" is a remarkable testimony to the encyclical's deeply pastoral interest in proposing the Gospel, not simply as discrete ethical decisions or limitations on actions, but rather as a proclamation "for the life of the world," recalling the words of *Optatam Totius*. John Paul II writes, quite famously: "*The moral life presents itself as the response* due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man" (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 10). Thus, the first observable feature of Francis's "evangelical morality" noted above—morality as a *response* to the love of God—is the very departure point for John Paul II's encyclical; the continuity on this point is difficult to overstate.

Furthermore, as is often recognized, *Veritatis Splendor* represents a remarkable development in the unfolding of a moral vision "nourished more on the teaching of the Bible" that the Council recommended.³⁵ The meditation on the "Rich Young Man" from Matthew's Gospel as the narrational *inclusio* grounds the discussion of morality in Scripture, while also providing a vivid illustration, biblically and Christologically, of what it means for the moral life to

³⁴ See also *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 29: "The Second Vatican Council invited scholars to take 'special care for the renewal of moral theology,' in such a way that 'its scientific presentation, increasingly based on the teaching of Scripture, will cast light on the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and on their obligation to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world.' The Council also encouraged theologians, 'while respecting the methods and requirements of theological science, to look for a *more appropriate way of communicating* doctrine to the people of their time; since there is a difference between the deposit or the truths of faith and the manner in which they are expressed, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment.' This led to a further invitation, one extended to all the faithful, but addressed to theologians in particular: 'The faithful should live in the closest contact with others of their time, and should work for a perfect understanding of their modes of thought and feelings as expressed in their culture.'"

³⁵ See Servais Pinckaers, "The New Law in *Veritatis Splendor*," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17, no. 2 (2011): 209: "In keeping with the Second Vatican Council's recommendation to bring moral theology to fuller perfection by a presentation more deeply enriched by Scripture, John Paul II has wished to strengthen the bonds between Catholic moral teaching and the Gospel, bonds which have grown too slack." Francis takes up this bond between Catholic moral teaching and the Gospel likewise in *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 6: "I will begin with an opening chapter inspired by the Scriptures, to set a proper tone."

present itself as a response to God: if the questions asked of the young man are questions addressed to the heart of every human person (see no. 8 and no. 117 of the encyclical), then this Gospel dialogue shows that the moral life is always indeed a response to the “initiatives taken by God [in Jesus Christ] out of love for man.”

When the encyclical transitions to its assessment of certain trends in moral theology, it does so in the firm self-understanding that this engagement is a requirement of evangelization:

In addressing this Encyclical to you, my Brother Bishops, it is my intention to state *the principles necessary for discerning what is contrary to ‘sound doctrine,’* drawing attention to those elements of the Church’s moral teaching which today appear particularly exposed to error, ambiguity, or neglect. . . . Because the Church has been sent by Jesus to preach the Gospel and to “make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all” that he has commanded (cf. Matt 28:19–20), *she today once more puts forward the Master’s reply* [to the question, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?”], a reply that possesses a light and a power capable of answering even the most controversial and complex questions. (no. 30)

Thus, whatever negative pronouncements are included in chapter two, the document addresses these as an implicit requirement *with a view towards* the broader, positive proposal of the Gospel; they are driven by the need to proclaim the integral message of the Gospel, and the primary purpose is not to draw attention to the errors, but rather to “elements of the Church’s moral teaching.” It might be said, with Ratzinger, that according to this vision the “no’s” in Catholic moral teaching are “the concretization of a great ‘yes.’”³⁶

Further, it is significant that the stated purposes of *Veritatis Splendor* are very specific: “To reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching, with the precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied” (no. 4). The encyclical’s purpose is not, therefore, to reflect on the Church’s moral teaching in the life of the church as a whole, nor is it, like *Amoris Laetitia*, a consideration of a central mystery of the church’s teaching (“On Love in the Family”); such broader purposes would necessitate a more universal and pastoral dimension. *Veritatis Splendor* sets out to recall “certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine” at risk in current circumstances, thereby signaling both the encyclical’s importance and its specificity. Along these lines, it is striking to consider the fact that John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, “On the Role of the

³⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Renewal of Moral Theology,” 184.

Family in the Modern World,” represents a much more comprehensive approach, treating fundamental truths of doctrine while also spending considerable time on the total pastoral care of the family. Francis’s caution against a “gradualness of the law” in Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia*—as opposed to the “law of gradualness” in authentic pastoral care—is drawn from a central pastoral section of *Familiaris Consortio* (“The Moral Progress of Married People”). Such a pastoral principle does not appear in *Veritatis Splendor*.³⁷

Nevertheless, if the “virtuous circle” of theology and pastoral action observed by Francis is correct, then the more narrow, doctrinal focus of *Veritatis Splendor* does not render it set apart from pastoral concern. Indeed, according to that virtuous circle, those “certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine” highlighted by *Veritatis Splendor* are necessary for authentic pastoral action; if those fundamental truths stressed by *Veritatis Splendor* “risk being distorted and denied,” then so too does pastoral action. As quoted above, Francis suggests that “pastoral care of the Church is . . . unthinkable as a pastoral care . . . that does not know how to treasure revelation and its tradition with a view to better understanding and transmission of the faith.”³⁸ In faithfulness to this polar vision of moral theology and pastoral action, I would argue that one of the most potent and explosive contributions of *Veritatis Splendor* to the conciliar trajectory of pastoral renewal occurs precisely in chapter two, within what are perhaps the most intellectually and doctrinally rigorous paragraphs of the document, namely, the discussion of the object of the moral act. These paragraphs contain a remarkable articulation of moral action as a dimension and demand of the Gospel, and they likewise have significant implications for the development of authentic pastoral action; in fact, they constitute what I would call a pastoral action theory. In particular, the well-known statement in no. 78 of *Veritatis Splendor*—that “in order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to

³⁷ See *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 34: “Married people too are called upon to progress unceasingly in their moral life, with the support of a sincere and active desire to gain ever better knowledge of the values enshrined in and fostered by the law of God. They must also be supported by an upright and generous willingness to embody these values in their concrete decisions. They cannot however look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy. ‘And so what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law,’ as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations. In God’s plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God’s command with serene confidence in God’s grace and in his or her own will.”

³⁸ Pope Francis, “Discorso alla Comunità Accademica del Pontificio Istituto ‘Giovanni Paolo II’ per Studi su Matrimonio e Famiglia,” October 27, 2016, no. 5.

place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*”—represents an essential theological presupposition for Francis’s vision of “evangelical morality,” particularly the proclamation of moral teaching *in love* through the art of accompanying and ultimately integrating. Given the voluminous discussion and debate concerning the interpretation of no. 78 and the adjacent paragraphs in chapter two, the following treatment will not be systematic, but rather extend a discussion of its basic content to the context of pastoral renewal.³⁹

At the outset, it is crucial to observe that the first sentence of no. 78 cites Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 18, a. 6, in which the Angelic Doctor articulates a nuanced vision of human action: he suggests that the moral adjudication of a single, voluntary human act requires the consideration of a two-fold action (within that act, as it were), with two distinct objects: the “object of the interior act of the will,” related to the intention (end), the “what for” of the actor—as well as the “object of the external action . . . that on which the action is brought to bear,” the chosen behavior of the actor. Thus, for Thomas, and likewise for *Veritatis Splendor*, both the intention of the actor and the proximate, chosen behavior are essential in determining the moral species of the act, i.e., whether that act is *good* or *evil*. The encyclical is quite clear that *neither* of these dimensions, taken on their own merits, is “neutral” *vis-à-vis* good or evil: the interior *purpose* of the actor is always ordered or disordered with regard to the human person’s *ultimate* end, God, and the external *behavior* of the actor is either capable or not capable of being ordered to that ultimate end. Concerning the interior purpose or intention of the actor, *Veritatis Splendor* writes in no. 72: “Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with man’s true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God

³⁹ The following may be consulted for a more systematic consideration of *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 78: David Crawford, “Experience of Nature, Moral Experience: Interpreting *Veritatis Splendor*’s ‘Perspective of the Acting Person,’” *Communio* 37 (2010): 266–282; Kevin L. Flannery, “Placing Oneself ‘In the Perspective of the Acting Person’: *Veritatis Splendor* and the Nature of the Moral Act,” in *Live the Truth: The Moral Legacy of John Paul II in Catholic Health Care*, ed. Edward J. Furton (National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2006): 47–49; Steven A. Long, “*Veritatis Splendor* §78 and the Teleological Grammar of the Moral Act,” *Nova et Vetera* 1 (2008): 139–156; William F. Murphy, “A Reading of Aquinas in Support of *Veritatis Splendor* on the Moral Object,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 11 (2008): 100–126; Martin Rhonheimer, “The Perspective of the Acting Person and the Nature of Practical Reason: The ‘Object of the Human Act’ in Thomistic Anthropology of Action,” *Nova et Vetera* 2 (2004): 461–516. For a more detailed explanation of what I attempt to articulate in the following paragraphs, see Matthew Kuhner, “‘The Perspective of the Acting Person’ and Moral Action: Reading *Veritatis Splendor* no. 78 with Servais Pinckaers, OP,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 1 (2021): 73–101.

himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness.” Concerning the external, chosen behavior, *Veritatis Splendor* cites the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1761: “There are certain specific kinds of behavior that are always wrong to choose, because choosing them involves a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil.” Note that the intrinsically evil character of such behaviors arises *precisely because* they are not capable of being ordered “teleologically” towards the person’s authentic good; it is not enough to think of intrinsically evil acts as external, physical patterns of behavior apart from the acting person. As *Veritatis Splendor* notes, “Christian ethics, which pays particular attention to the moral object [i.e., a freely chosen kind of behavior], does not refuse to consider the inner ‘teleology’ of acting, inasmuch as it is directed to promoting the true good of the person” (no. 78). The vision of moral acts unfolded in no. 78, inspired by the action theory of Aquinas, is deeply significant: it is necessary “to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person” in order to understand the morality of the total, unified action, insofar as it is the result of an interior act of the will *and* an external act: an external behavior chosen for a *purpose*, under the deliberation of the will.

The crucial role played by no. 78 comes into greater view when considering the encyclical’s criticisms of certain moral theories, such as consequentialism, proportionalism, and “fundamental option” theories. For *Veritatis Splendor*, each of these theories distorts or departs from the aforementioned vision of moral action. For example, *Veritatis Splendor* is concerned that “fundamental option” theories reduce the external, chosen behavior to a “premoral” or “physical good” emptied of moral significance, seeking the moral determination of the act in the “fundamental option” of the interior act of the will alone.⁴⁰ But John Paul II suggests that this evacuation of moral significance on the part of the external, chosen behavior occurs

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 65: “A distinction thus comes to be introduced between the *fundamental option* and *deliberate choices of a concrete kind of behavior*. In some authors this division tends to become a *separation*, when they expressly limit moral ‘good’ and ‘evil’ to the transcendental dimension proper to the fundamental option, and describe as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ the choices of particular ‘innerworldly’ kinds of behavior: those, in other words, concerning man’s relationship with himself, with others, and with the material world. There thus appears to be established within human acting a clear disjunction between two levels of morality: on the one hand the order of good and evil, which is dependent on the will, and on the other hand specific kinds of behavior, which are judged to be morally right or wrong only on the basis of a technical calculation of the proportion between the ‘pre-moral’ or ‘physical’ goods and evils which actually result from the action. This is pushed to the point where a concrete kind of behavior, even one freely chosen, comes to be considered as a merely physical process, and not according to the criteria proper to a human act.”

precisely because this vision of the “fundamental option” does “not do justice to the rational finality immanent in man’s acting and in each of his deliberate decisions” (no. 67). In other words, such a “fundamental option” position does not only remove the moral significance of the external act *but also fails to properly attend to the interior act of the will*. The rational finality of the choice is itself eviscerated, since considering the external action as “pre-moral” or simply “physical” is actually to downplay the actor’s choice of that action towards an end. Though such “fundamental option” theories strive to foreground the interior act of the will and the significance of intention in determining the morality of a given act, it does so by untethering the purpose of the actor from their external behaviors, a move which ultimately *devalues*—does “not do justice to”—the way in which the rational finality of the actor *permeates the entirety of their external actions*. Ultimately, as John Paul II suggests, “to separate the fundamental option from concrete kinds of behavior means to contradict the substantial integrity or personal unity of the moral agent in his body and in his soul” (no. 67). The “fundamental option” theories described in *Veritatis Splendor* thus fail to obtain the perspective of the acting person, inasmuch as the unity of the acting person is put in jeopardy; it is no longer possible to understand the actions of the person through their *purpose* and their *behavior* in the world, understood organically, holistically, and hylomorphically.

Placing oneself in the perspective of the acting person, then, requires one to see *both* the behavior *and* the “what for” of the actor, namely, how the acting person understands *this chosen behavior* as fitting for *the good of their person*. Only by taking seriously these dimensions of the act can one really take on the acting person’s perspective; otherwise, the engagement of their perspective will remain partial or fragmentary. In this sense, *Veritatis Splendor* appears to argue that “fundamental option” theories, consequentialism, and proportionalism fail to place themselves in the perspective of the acting person, precisely because they variously fail to give full due to what every acting person *does* when they act: for that acting person thinks their chosen behavior really matters, and that this chosen behavior matters because it was deliberately chosen for a particular reason and a particular purpose.

Ultimately, *Veritatis Splendor*’s emphasis on the importance of “placing oneself in the perspective of the acting person” through a consideration of the integrated whole of human action *undergirds and makes possible* the vision of “evangelical morality” proposed by Francis, precisely at the level of action theory.⁴¹ Indeed, I think it

⁴¹ For further evidence of this point *vis-à-vis* the application of “the perspective of the acting person” to the question of Communion for the divorced and remarried in the

justified to call this a *pastoral action theory*. If “discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305), if the “art of accompaniment” requires “a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 171), and if all of this begins by coming alongside them “in the moral state in which they find themselves,”⁴² it will be necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person; only from such a perspective of *taking on the place of the other in respect and love*, by understanding the importance given by the other to their concrete behaviors and intentions, might one begin to aid them in seeing how the behaviors they choose might be more authentically ordered to their ultimate end, God, their greatest good and joy.⁴³

CONCLUSION

In a 1995 essay titled, “The New Law in *Veritatis Splendor*,” Servais Pinckaers argues quite convincingly that John Paul II’s encyclical represents a remarkable response to the Second Vatican Council’s call for renewal in moral theology, a renewal borne from the pastoral heart of the Council. At the same time, he reflects soberly on the broader impact of this renewal:

context of *Amoris Laetitia*, see Anthony Hollowell, “Moral Impossibility and Communion to the Divorced and Remarried,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 42–43: “Francis’s call for discernment follows as a pastoral consequence of Pope John Paul II’s Thomistic personalism, for although *Veritatis Splendor* teaches that the object is determined in the perspective of the acting person, the object can still be discerned by those outside the acting person, and some valuable elements (but not the only elements) of such discernment can be found in the conscience of the acting person.”

⁴² Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the Conference Promoted by the Alphonsian Academy,” March 23, 2023.

⁴³ See *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 308, citing *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 270: “Jesus ‘expects us to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead to enter into the reality of other people’s lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated.’” See also David Cloutier and Robert Koerpel, “Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary in Catholic Moral Thought,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 2 (2021): 193: “Francis consistently preaches inclusion of any and all who might be struggling with living out the fullness of the Church’s teachings—and we might add that this is true regardless of the area of teaching, sexual or social, life issue or economic justice issue. Yet that inclusion does not legitimate views contrary to the Church’s teachings, when construed properly not simply as arbitrary ecclesial laws but as the ‘principles’ of the final end of human sexuality involved in the Church’s moral vision.”

In one sense, all is yet to be done, for it is not so easy to pass from a too natural morality, focusing on obligations and prohibitions, to a morality open to the dynamism of the Gospel. . . . We perceive the dynamism of evangelical morality. In contrast to legalistic morality, which halts at the fulfillment of obligations, it spontaneously goes further, as life tends towards growth and maturity, as love aspires to its perfection. . . . This is the direction in which *Veritatis Splendor* leads us.⁴⁴

The fact that “all is yet to be done” in the articulation of an “evangelical morality” undoubtedly highlights why Francis has taken up this trajectory anew, furthering it in significant ways that require further thought and development still, especially among moral theologians and pastors. At the same time, Pinckaers’s words highlight the deep continuity among the Second Vatican Council, *Veritatis Splendor*, and Francis’s vision of “evangelical morality.” May this trajectory of renewal, permeated by a “predominantly pastoral view of the Church’s teaching office,” continue to unfold, in the light of the Gospel and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, “an ethics conceived not as a series of precepts but as the event of an encounter, of a love that then also knows how to create corresponding actions.”⁴⁵ **M**

Matthew Kuhner, PhD, is vice president/academic dean and associate professor of systematic theology at St. Bernard’s School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester, NY, and he serves on the editorial board of *Communio: International Catholic Review*.

⁴⁴ Servais Pinckaers, OP, “The New Law in *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17, no. 2 (2010): 215–216.

⁴⁵ Ratzinger, “The Renewal of Moral Theology,” 184.