

Amoris Laetitia Develops the Subjective Conscience from *Veritatis Splendor*

Matthew P. Schneider

Abstract: The subjective and objective aspects of conscience often exist in tension in Catholic theology: there is a need to affirm that an objective law exists by which proper conscience formation is judged, while acknowledging a subjective aspect in each person, obliged to follow her, even erroneous, conscience. Although not the focus of either *Veritatis Splendor* or *Amoris Laetitia*, these two papal documents demonstrate these dual aspects of conscience well and allow a better understanding of conscience together than they could apart. Reading each in light of the other provides a fuller view and illuminates the tension between the two aspects of conscience. *Veritatis Splendor* provides a clear explanation of the objective aspect of conscience while briefly mentioning the subjective. *Amoris Laetitia* briefly reaffirms the objectivity of conscience and then dramatically expands on its subjectivity, spending significant time on mitigating factors and the formation of conscience as both a starting point and an end goal. This paper analyzes these documents in dialogue with Charles Curran as contrary view to the two popes.

IN CATHOLIC TEACHING, THERE IS A CONSTANT TENSION BETWEEN the objective and subjective elements of conscience, described both as the voice of God leading a person to moral truth and their personal judgment of a particular moral situation. *Veritatis Splendor* effectively specifies conscience's objective aspect, while *Amoris Laetitia* expands papal teachings on the subjective aspect but without denying the objectivity of conscience.

This essay seeks to read each papal document in light of the other to maintain the productive tension between the objective and subjective elements of conscience.¹ Several scholars have already read *Amoris Laetitia* in light of *Veritatis Splendor*,² but the opposite

¹ I presented an early version of these arguments during the conference "Human Action and the Drama of Accompaniment: The 30th Anniversary of *Veritatis Splendor*," St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry, Rochester, NY, September 29-October 1, 2023.

² Angel Perez-Lopez, "Veritatis Splendor and Amoris Laetitia: Neither Lamented nor Celebrated Discontinuity," *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 1173–1204; Jose

approach is less common and usually focused on applying the practical elements of *Amoris Laetitia* rather than reflecting on the issue of conscience. This essay does not present a radical new proposal but identifies a connection unexplored in existing literature. In doing so, it seeks to push back against those who argue that what *Amoris Laetitia* teaches is what *Veritatis Splendor* condemns as a form of “creative” conscience (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 54).³ At the same time, the article rejects the position of those who over-contextualize intrinsic evil as described in *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 79, to the point of turning it into a meaningless category that almost never exists in concrete moral choices. Both of these views put the two documents in opposition to each other,⁴ while the essay seeks to show their harmony by claiming that objectivity and subjectivity both exist in each individual conscience and that the individual is always called to integrate the objective aspect of conscience into the subjective one.⁵

To provide the backdrop for examining *Veritatis Splendor*’s and *Amoris Laetitia*’s views on conscience, I will start by considering four preliminaries that give us the context necessary to understand these documents with greater precision. In particular, I will focus on the hermeneutic of continuity, conscience in the magisterium before *Veritatis Splendor*, conscience in Thomas Aquinas, and the objectivity-subjectivity of conscience in Charles Curran as a view contrary to the one held by the two popes. After these preliminaries,

Granados, Stephen Kampowski, and Juan Jose Perez-Soba, *Accompanying, Discerning, Integrating: A Handbook for the Pastoral Care of the Family According to Amoris Laetitia* (Emmaus Road, 2017); Matthew Schneider, “Does the Text of *Amoris Laetitia* Allow Communion for the Divorced and Remarried? Part 1,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, February 12, 2019, www.hprweb.com/2019/02/does-the-text-of-amoris-laetitia-allow-communion-for-the-divorced-and-remarried/; Matthew Schneider, “Does the Text of *Amoris Laetitia* Allow Communion for the Divorced and Remarried? Part 2,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, March 10, 2019, www.hprweb.com/2019/03/does-the-text-of-amoris-laetitia-allow-communion-for-the-divorced-and-remarried-2/; Robert Fastiggi, “Responding to the Five Dubia from *Amoris Laetitia* Itself,” *La Stampa*, March 12, 2018, www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2018/03/12/news/responding-to-the-five-dubia-from-amoris-laetitia-itself-1.33989886/.

³ For a description and response to this kind of critique, see Antonio Autiero, “Resistances to *Amoris Laetitia*: A Critical Approach,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, no. 2 (2022): 9, doi.org/10.55476/001c.37339.

⁴ For an example of scholars who place John Paul II and Francis in opposition to each other, see Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, “*Amoris Laetitia*: Towards a Methodological and Anthropological Integration of Catholic Social and Sexual Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 637, doi.org/10.1177/0040563918784772.

⁵ Autiero seems to hold a similar view by explaining that we must keep together “the objective level of morality established on the basis of the acts carried out and the subjective level affirming the primacy of the person and his or her moral substance” (“Resistances to *Amoris Laetitia*,” 10).

the essay examines each of the documents considered and their relationships.

PRELIMINARIES

Hermeneutic of Continuity

To be understood according to the mind of the church, papal documents should be read through a hermeneutic of continuity. While the school of thought to which I belong considers that this way of interpreting the relationship between magisterial documents is correct,⁶ it must be recognized that its approach is not universal, which warrants a brief explanation. To provide the latter, let us turn to Benedict XVI's way of contrasting hermeneutic of discontinuity and continuity. Though he describes these in relation to Vatican II, the same logical framework can apply to other magisterial texts as well. Benedict XVI first describes the hermeneutic of discontinuity, rupture, or suspicion:

It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.⁷

This approach ultimately derives from a secular hermeneutic of suspicion that stands contrary to a Christian or theological way of reading magisterial texts. In contrast, the hermeneutic of continuity or reform takes seriously what John XXIII established as the goals of Vatican II, namely, to “transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion, which throughout twenty centuries, notwithstanding difficulties and contrasts, has become the common patrimony of men.”⁸ Benedict XVI describes this process not

⁶ For example, Perez-Lopez argues that any sound interpretation of a passage from a magisterial document must pay attention to its literal meaning, be compatible with other affirmations in the document, and be coherent with other magisterial documents (“*Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia*,” 1188).

⁷ Benedict XVI, “Christmas Greetings to the Members of the Roman Curia and Prelature,” December 22, 2005, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html.

⁸ John XXIII, “Opening Speech at Vatican II,” October 11, 1962, vatican2voice.org/91docs/opening_speech.htm.

merely as a static repetition of existing dogmas but as presenting them anew for current and future generations.

In the speech closing Vatican II, Paul VI critiqued how the hermeneutic of suspicion was too influenced by culture at the expense of tradition: “Some have been inclined to suspect that an easy-going and excessive responsiveness to the outside world, passing events, cultural fashions, temporary needs, an alien way of thinking . . . may have swayed persons and acts of the ecumenical synod, at the expense of the fidelity which is due to tradition.”⁹ Following the council, the spirit of rupture manifested both in those who promoted a spirit contrary to the council’s text and the traditionalists who viewed it as a moment of apostasy. This view of the council presented a greater obstacle than liturgy to the reunion of the Lefebvrists (Society of St. Pius X) under John Paul II.¹⁰ Ratzinger would critique both extremes that interpret Vatican II as a moment of rupture or change of doctrine. Since at least 1985, he explicitly argued in favor of reading post-conciliar teachings in continuity rather than rupture with pre-conciliar ones.¹¹

Using a hermeneutic of continuity works bidirectionally: one can read new magisterial teachings in light of old ones and vice versa. In fact, it functions much like how we read one passage of Scripture in light of the whole Bible and the analogy of faith or superstructure of various truths (*Catechism*, nos. 112 and 114). This method of reading will help us understand *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia* as mutually interpretative.

Existing Magisterial Teaching

Let us now turn to providing an overview of what the magisterium taught regarding conscience before the publication of *Veritatis Splendor*. This analysis will help us establish a broader magisterial framework for reading John Paul II’s and Francis’s teachings on conscience together.

In 1690, the Holy Office condemned several Jansenist propositions. The third condemned proposition establishes a significant limit to conscience: “It is not licit to follow a [probable] opinion, even if the

⁹ Paul VI, “Conclusion of the II Vatican Council: Speech at the Last Public Session,” December 7, 1965, www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651207_epilogo-concilio.html.

¹⁰ Gilles Routhier, “The Hermeneutic of Reform as a Task for Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2012): 220, 223–232, doi.org/10.1177/0021140012443635.

¹¹ Routhier, “The Hermeneutic of Reform,” 233.

most probable among the probable ones.”¹² This condemnation demonstrates that if a person’s conscience is not absolutely certain about the right course of action but has an understanding of what is likely moral, they can and should act in accord with that understanding. This implicitly acknowledges that one cannot ignore the subjective aspect of conscience.

In 1956, the Holy Office issued an instruction on situation ethics. While erring in the opposite direction from the Jansenists, this moral system was condemned as well. As the instruction explains, situation ethics holds that “the decisive and ultimate norm of conduct is not the objective right order, determined by the law of nature and known with certainty from that law, but a certain intimate judgment and light of the mind of each individual.”¹³ The last phrase about an individual’s mental judgment accurately describes one aspect of conscience, but the followers of situation ethics err when this judgment is no longer grounded in the principles of a higher law and relies solely on the individual’s situation.

In 1963, John XXIII issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, which characterizes conscience thus: “The world’s Creator has stamped man’s inmost being with an order revealed to man by his conscience; and his conscience insists on his preserving it. Men ‘show the work of the law written in their hearts. Their conscience bears witness to them.’ And how could it be otherwise? All created being reflects the infinite wisdom of God. It reflects it all the more clearly, the higher it stands in the scale of perfection” (no. 5, quoting Romans 2:15). This description reveals conscience as both objective and subjective. Objectively, it indicates that a divine order exists, stamped on each person, and reflecting God’s wisdom. The subjective element appears in how this order is uniquely stamped on each person, but the emphasis here falls primarily on the objective aspect.

Gaudium et Spes addresses conscience meaningfully twice. The first relevant paragraph emphasizes the objective nature of conscience. It begins thus: “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience” (no. 16), strongly affirming the objective aspect of an external law to which conscience must correspond. The same paragraph then shifts to the subjective element: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (no. 16). Autiero summarizes this duality by explaining that we must always recognize “the objective

¹² Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, trans. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, 43rd ed. (Ignatius, 2012), no. 2303.

¹³ Denzinger and Hünermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, no. 3918.

level of morality established on the basis of the acts carried out and the subjective level affirming the primacy of the person and his or her moral substance.”¹⁴ Such a description positions the eternal law given by God as the ultimate arbiter of conscience and source of its objectivity. In particular, this conciliar passage establishes that conscience represents both a judgment measured against objective law and also an intimate, subjective judgment through which we strive to hear God’s voice more clearly. Later on, *Gaudium et Spes* focuses more on the formation of conscience: “In order for individual men to discharge with greater exactness the obligations of their conscience toward themselves and the various groups to which they belong, they must be carefully educated to a higher degree of culture through the use of the immense resources available today to the human race” (no. 31). The need for conscience formation acknowledges both the subjective nature and the possibility of malformation of conscience while also recognizing a more objective standard toward which we can strive to form conscience.

Vatican II also promulgated *Dignitatis Humanae*, a declaration focusing on religious liberty. It affirms that “every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means” (no. 3). While this document specifically addresses religious matters, its principles seem applicable to other areas, provided they do not contravene natural law or directly harm other human beings. For example, one can choose their country of residence based on conscience but cannot choose violent assault in liberty of conscience. A Catholic might avoid meat based on conscience, although not required, or submit a conscience exemption to a vaccine based on sincerely held beliefs, even if based on dubious science. This strongly emphasizes the subjective aspect of conscience and the fact that there is an inherent value in respecting this internal conscience even when erroneous.

Persona Humana from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addresses conscience in novel ways in two paragraphs. First, it establishes that a good conscience aligns with church teachings by indicating that “a spirit of docility to the Church’s teaching” and “what an upright conscience dictates in concrete cases”¹⁵ refer to the same reality. An upright conscience dictates in concrete cases what accords with church teaching. Later, the same document repeatedly notes the

¹⁴ Autiero, “Resistances to *Amoris Laetitia*,” 10.

¹⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana*: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, December 29, 1975, no. 11, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html.

need for enlightening consciences both in confronting new ethical questions and in the confessional.¹⁶ This second citation parallels the second paragraph above from *Gaudium et Spes* as both emphasize the need for forming or enlightening consciences, demonstrating both the objective and subjective aspects of conscience.

Finally, John Paul II articulated important principles regarding conscience in *Dominum et Vivificantem*. He notes that conscience is a gift based on the *Imago Dei*: “To man, created to the image of God, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of conscience, so that in this conscience the image may faithfully reflect its model” (no. 36). We cannot overlook this divine origin of conscience, explaining why conscience serves as each person’s divine interior voice. John Paul II further emphasizes the objectivity of conscience by explaining that “a result of an upright conscience is, first of all, to call good and evil by their proper name” (no. 43). At the same time, he also observes that “man’s inmost being [is] . . . the sanctuary of human consciences” (no. 42), thus reaffirming the interiority and privacy of conscience *Gaudium et Spes* articulated.

In the magisterial teachings preceding *Veritatis Splendor*, we find both objective and subjective aspects of conscience clearly identified. However, these documents do not develop conscience as extensively as *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia* would later do. Referring to them serves to establish that the church’s official teachings recognize the presence of objective and subjective aspects of conscience. Furthermore, the documents just analyzed also refer to freedom of conscience, conscience formation, the secrecy of conscience, and its divine origin. These are all elements John Paul II and Francis further elaborate in their own magisterial teaching.

Aquinas

John Paul II seems set on presenting a Thomistic view, and Francis himself declares that “everything written in *Amoris Laetitia* is Thomistic, from beginning to end.”¹⁷ Thus, an overview of Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of conscience provides important context to understand the writings of both popes and further supports a harmonious reading of their teaching. Surprisingly, given the emphasis on conscience in modern moral theology, Aquinas dedicates no specific question in the *Summa* to it. However, three articles in the *Summa* describe his thoughts on conscience.

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana*, no. 13.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, “Opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Rome,” June 16, 2016, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/june/documents/papa-francesco_20160616_convegno-diocesi-roma.html.

First, Aquinas addresses whether conscience is an intellectual power and concludes that it is an act rather than a power as it can be set aside or ignored. He observes that the word conscience “implies the relation of knowledge to something: for conscience may be resolved into ‘*cum alio scientia*,’ i.e., knowledge applied to an individual case” (ST I, q. 79, a. 13). This etymology reveals conscience’s subjective nature as it represents the knowledge the person has regarding an individual case rather than some perfect external law. At the same time, Aquinas writes that conscience “is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke” (ST I, q. 79, a. 13), a characterization that suggests a more objective dimension, given that a witness testifies not merely to subjective knowledge but something external. Finally, Aquinas explains, “Sometimes the name conscience is given to the first natural habit—namely, ‘*synderesis*’” (ST I, q. 79, a. 13). Accordingly, this article explains that conscience can be understood equivocally or analogically and is characterized by both subjective and objective elements.

Two subsequent articles examine erring conscience, thereby introducing an emphasis on the subjectivity of conscience, considering that a purely objective conscience could not err. The first article asks whether a will is evil if it contradicts erroneous reason and concludes that such a will would indeed be evil. Aquinas explains that “to inquire whether the will is evil when it is at variance with erring reason, is the same as to inquire ‘whether an erring conscience binds’” (ST I-II, q. 19, a. 5). The goodness or evil of the will depends on the object as perceived by reason or conscience, not on its intrinsic goodness or vileness. Aquinas notes, “The will that is at variance with erring reason or conscience, is evil in some way on account of the object [as perceived], on which the goodness or malice of the will depends; not indeed on account of the object according as it is in its own nature; but according as it is accidentally apprehended by reason as something evil to do or to avoid” (ST I-II, q. 19, a. 5). He explains this because “the object of the will is that which is proposed by the reason” (ST I-II, q. 19, a. 5). Since conscience represents a judgment of reason, then, we can conclude that the goodness or evilness of an object corresponds to conscience’s judgment of it. The next article continues this topic, addressing the opposite question of whether a will is good if following an erring reason and establishing Aquinas’s position on whether an erring conscience excuses a person (ST I-II, q. 19, a. 6).

Overall, Aquinas presents a view aligned with the previously examined magisterial teachings by recognizing both objective and subjective aspects of conscience and emphasizing the need to form subjective conscience in accordance with objective moral law. Furthermore, he also acknowledges that one has a duty to follow an errant but invincibly ignorant conscience.

Charles Curran

Examining Catholic theologians who write about conscience but do not always align with papal teachings provides another valuable context for understanding the two documents considered. Charles Curran serves as an example of this perspective. Despite his disagreement with objective church teachings on significant matters,¹⁸ part of his account of conscience identifies the objective-subjective tension highlighted so far in a way that appears compatible with John Paul II's and Francis's teachings on this topic. However, Curran ultimately overemphasizes the subjective aspect of conscience to a degree that extends well beyond what *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia* teach. This section explains Curran's general view of conscience, while what he wrote about John Paul II's moral theology will be considered in later sections of the essay.

Curran's initial treatment of the tension between objective and subjective elements appears reasonably sound. In an early work, he clearly articulates both dimensions: "Conscience forms its judgment discursively from the objective principles of the moral order; but at the same time, there is also a direct connatural knowing process. The dictate of conscience is concrete, subjective, individual, and existential."¹⁹ This presentation acknowledges both the objective aspects found in the principles of the moral order as the foundation of conscience's dictates and its subjective aspects manifested in connatural knowledge and particular judgments of specific acts. Overall, Curran seems to recognize "the primacy of the subjective" while acknowledging "the importance of the objective."²⁰

Curran also correctly observes that moral theology can sometimes become too hyper-focused on training confessors at the expense of the broader theological context.²¹ For example, he critiques the manuals by noting their overemphasis on the distinction between mortal and venial sin²² and for the fact that, while expressing the objective law

¹⁸ For example, Curran has expressed disagreements with what the church teaches regarding divorce, abortion, euthanasia, homosexual acts, sex outside marriage, contraception, sterilization, and masturbation. Curran's statements against church teaching on these matters are catalogued in Schubert M. Ogden, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: The Catholic University of America," *Academe* 75, no. 5 (1989): 29, doi.org/10.2307/40249738.

¹⁹ Charles E. Curran, *Christian Morality Today: The Renewal of Moral Theology* (Fides, 1966), 17.

²⁰ Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis, Moral Traditions, and Moral Arguments* (Georgetown University Press, 1999), 189.

²¹ Charles E. Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 221–222.

²² Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today*, 191.

effectively, they gave the impression that “the law spells out all of one’s moral obligations and conscience passively conforms to the existing laws.”²³ While conscience should ideally function this way, Curran correctly observes that subjective conscience does not always process moral law so directly. In fact, Curran goes further and seems to overemphasize the subjective dimension of conscience. He presents three models for understanding morality: deontological, teleological, and relational.²⁴ All three models have important insights, but he appears to diminish the deontological aspect to the point of irrelevance, creating what John Paul II would later criticize as an excessively teleological theory. Curran summarizes his view in four steps: (1) the importance of the relational model; (2) the subjectivity of the individual conscience; (3) conscience as cognitive, affective, and moral, not merely cognitive; and (4) specific metaphysical theories of conscience.²⁵ The notable absence from this summary of the deontological model—the most objective one—is noteworthy and points to Curran’s over-emphasis on the subjective dimension of conscience. Thus, it is not surprising that, in a more recent publication, Curran offers a simplified definition of conscience that, while adequate, does not capture the subjective-objective tension he recognizes in parts of his work: “Conscience is generally understood as a judgment about the morality of an act to be done or omitted, or already done or omitted by the person.”²⁶

Curran seems to elevate the subjective aspect of conscience to a degree that risks overshadowing objective morality completely. He states, “The external law is static and very incomplete. It does not and cannot express the totality of man’s relationship with God.”²⁷ While it is true that the external law God puts into creation and in which human beings participate through the natural law is unchanging, it is incomplete only in the sense that its principles are often general and may not immediately resolve every issue of conscience. This incompleteness does not indicate a lack of guidance for human action but simply indicates that the law’s guidance functions more as a guardrail defining boundaries than as a command prescribing specific decisions made in conscience. For example, while eternal law establishes that human beings should spend daily time in prayer, it does not specify exactly what prayers a Catholic should recite each day; thus, one must exercise personal judgment of conscience to decide between *lectio divina*, the rosary, or other devotions. Still,

²³ Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology*, 227.

²⁴ Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology*, 228.

²⁵ Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology*, 243–244.

²⁶ Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today*, 172.

²⁷ Curran, *Christian Morality Today*, 20.

Curran further emphasizes the subjective dimension of conscience by noting that “there are no infallible criteria to determine if the decision of conscience is true.”²⁸ The best criteria we can use, he continues, are peace and joy. Now, while those elements hold value in deeper discernment where there is no obvious objective breaking of natural law, like determining a calling to a specific religious community, Curran’s statement seems to ignore the cases in which objective rules of natural, eternal, or ecclesiastical law clearly indicate that one option represents an incorrect choice. In such cases, an infallible criterion for choice does exist. In the end, even Curran would likely argue that experiencing peace and joy about murdering someone to collect life insurance proceeds would not constitute a true judgment of conscience.

Curran’s lack of focus on the objectivity of the moral order comes in part from his questioning of the authority of the magisterium. He accepts infallible teachings but sees no obligation to follow non-infallible magisterium, no matter how authoritative. For example, he accurately notes that in *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 62, John Paul II condemns direct abortion in the strongest terms short of an ex-cathedra statement. Yet, Curran argues that this teaching on abortion is “not definitive or infallible teaching”²⁹ and that, accordingly, direct abortion can be moral under certain circumstances. His judgment about the magisterium’s lack of authority to teach infallibly or definitively on moral matters is not limited to the case of abortion. Instead, Curran claims that “the teaching of the papal magisterium on complex moral issues is not always a certain truth.”³⁰ Judging by the context, he uses the word “complex” not just to refer to cases of prudence or cases where not all teachings are in accord. Instead, Curran considers complex even things that would not be considered such by many moral theologians, like abortion and sexual activity outside of marriage, and thus ends up directly opposing multiple church teachings. It must be recognized that the comment quoted above does have a degree of truth, given that there are statements on moral matters made by the magisterium at different times discordant with each other and that, accordingly, cannot all be certainly true.³¹ However, Curran takes this principle to such an extreme point as to entail that almost no moral precepts remain certainly true unless they

²⁸ Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today*, 189.

²⁹ Charles E. Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* (Georgetown University Press, 2005), 132.

³⁰ Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, 133.

³¹ For a recent example, see the changes to the *Catechism* regarding the death penalty. Linda Bordoni, “Pope Francis: ‘Death Penalty Inadmissible,’” *Vatican News*, August 2, 2018, www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-08/pope-francis-cdf-ccc-death-penalty-revision-ladaria.html.

are infallibly defined, a position that functionally eliminates the objective aspect of conscience.

In conclusion, while Curran's views on conscience initially appear orthodox with a slight emphasis on the subjective that would be in line with the teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*, on further examination, they seem to go significantly further than Francis's proposal. Curran loses sight of the objective law articulated by the magisterium, something that both John Paul II and Francis consider essential for forming conscience. Thus, his analysis of conscience ends up emphasizing its subjective character to an extreme degree and rejecting some of the church's settled moral teachings.

VERITATIS SPLENDOR ON CONSCIENCE

In the previous section, we considered four preliminaries that ground the essay's interpretation of *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia*. The magisterial teaching on conscience before the publication of *Veritatis Splendor* and Aquinas's framework show that conscience has two aspects: objective and subjective. The hermeneutic of continuity guides us to read John Paul II's and Francis's teachings on conscience as complementary rather than contradictory while simultaneously acknowledging that each pope emphasizes one of the dimensions of conscience more than the other. Finally, Curran's perspective on conscience provides an alternative account that can be compared with *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia* to highlight how, contrary to Curran, these papal texts maintain the productive tension between the objective and subjective sides of conscience.

Veritatis Splendor emphasizes the objectivity of conscience and how it accords with natural and eternal law. It addresses subjectivity briefly and primarily in connection to the possibility of error. This section examines six key aspects of John Paul II's teachings on conscience: the reasons for writing the encyclical, the emphasis on objectivity and the object of the act, the possibility of error, the notion of invincible error, the importance of discerning whether an error is vincible or invincible, and the formation of conscience.

When examining *Veritatis Splendor*, one must consider its primary purpose, namely, to refute proportionalism, consequentialism, fundamental option theory, and other excessively teleological theories. While extensive debate exists about how to understand these theories with precision,³² the encyclical's fundamental concern with

³² Louis Janssens, "Teleology and Proportionality," *Bijdragen*, January 1, 1994, doi.org/10.2143/BIJ.55.2.2015240; Richard A. McCormick, "Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*," *Theological Studies* 55, no. 3 (1994), doi.org/10.1177/004056399405500303.

them is that they grant excessive autonomy to the subjective conscience and simplify the objective eternal law such that final ends take priority over the object of the act. Curran claims that “John Paul II’s approach to conscience is totally consistent with his overall perspective,”³³ which he describes as being fearful of the subjectivism and individualism present in today’s world. How fearful John Paul II is can be debated, but it is clear Curran sees such views as the interlocutor to whom John Paul II is responding in *Veritatis Splendor*. Countering these theories requires reinforcing the objective aspect of conscience, which thus becomes the element *Veritatis Splendor* decides to emphasize.

Veritatis Splendor states unequivocally, “The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the ‘object’ rationally chosen by the deliberate will” (no. 78, emphasis original). Although this object is chosen based on conscience’s judgment, what is emphasized is its objective morality. The subsequent paragraph further elaborates, “One must therefore reject the thesis . . . which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species—its ‘object’—the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behavior or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned” (no. 79, emphasis original). Certain objects are specified in a manner and to a degree that, in an objective sense, no moral justification exists for them, regardless of potential good outcomes. These are often referred to as intrinsically evil acts based on an extrinsic and objective morality. This objectivity is further expressed in the specific discussion of conscience:

The dignity of this rational forum [conscience] and the authority of its voice and judgments derive from the truth about moral good and evil, which it is called to listen to and to express. This truth is indicated by the “divine law,” *the universal and objective norm of morality*. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather, it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good (no. 60, emphasis original).

Conscience should reflect the divine law, which serves as the ultimate source for objectivity in conscience.

Moving on to the subjectivity of conscience, *Veritatis Splendor* notes the possibility of error:

³³ Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, 126.

Conscience, as the judgment of an act, is not exempt from the possibility of error. As the Council puts it, “not infrequently conscience can be mistaken as a result of invincible ignorance, although it does not on that account forfeit its dignity; but this cannot be said when a man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin.” In these brief words the Council sums up the doctrine which the Church down the centuries has developed with regard to the erroneous conscience. (no. 62, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16)

This acknowledgment of the possibility of ignorance explicitly refers to the subjective nature of conscience, as the objective law is free from error. When discussing the possibility of error, it is worth noting what *Veritatis Splendor* states elsewhere about conscience: “The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil” (no. 32). If conscience is individual, it is inherently subjective and thus may or may not align with objective truth. This creates the fundamental tension between conscience’s dual—objective and subjective—aspects.

In recognizing that conscience can err, *Veritatis Splendor* also explores the possibility of invincible error, that is, an error for which the person erring is not morally culpable. As John Paul II explains, an “error of conscience can be the result of an invincible ignorance, an ignorance of which the subject is not aware and which he is unable to overcome by himself” (no. 62).³⁴ At the same time, though, John Paul II emphasizes the objectivity of evil even in cases of invincible ignorance: “It is possible that the evil done as the result of invincible ignorance or a non-culpable error of judgment may not be imputable to the agent; but even in this case it does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good” (no. 63). Interestingly, while invincible appears four times in the two consecutive paragraphs of *Veritatis Splendor* cited above, the encyclical does not offer any guidance on discerning or distinguishing between vincibly and invincibly ignorant consciences. As we will see, *Amoris Laetitia* offers criteria that help distinguish between the various forms of ignorance.

In summary, *Veritatis Splendor* recognizes the goodness of following an errant conscience while noting its errant nature, as it is only subjectively rather than objectively right. Curran opposes John Paul II’s teachings about the issue of invincibly ignorant consciences

³⁴ The existence of invincible ignorance is relevant not only to questions regarding moral theology but also when it comes to Catholic teaching regarding the possibility of salvation for those who are formally members of other religions through no fault of their own but follow their conscience fully. See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16.

by claiming that St. Alphonsus Liguori “says it is the common opinion of theologians . . . that an act done in invincible ignorance is not only not imputable to the agent but also can be a good and meritorious act. John Paul II, with his emphasis on the primacy of objective truth, does not want to accept the position of St. Alphonsus and the common position of theologians today.”³⁵ Yet, Curran does not cite any specific text of John Paul II to justify such a critique and seems to misunderstand what the pope teaches about this matter. In fact, John Paul II states that an invincibly ignorant conscience “continues to speak in the name of that truth about the good which the subject is called to seek sincerely” (no. 62). Although this quote does not directly state that following an invincibly ignorant conscience is meritorious, it implies it. If even such an invincibly erroneous conscience keeps speaking the name of truth and the subject is called to follow it sincerely, it is hard to argue that John Paul II considers this unmeritorious, as Curran suggests.

When it comes to the distinction between the objective and subjective elements of conscience, *Veritatis Splendor* aims to address a particularly problematic view of conscience that would “permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law” (no. 56). However, the case of an invincibly ignorant conscience differs fundamentally from the view opposed by John Paul II. The invincibly ignorant conscience does not consider the action intrinsically evil but considers it good because, through no fault of the ignorant person, it does not know its objective morality. Instead, John Paul II is concerned about moral theories that, without being ignorant of the objective or external evaluation of an action as intrinsically evil, still decide to characterize it as good.

On this point, John Paul II emphasizes the reality that the church’s teachings constitute the objective law. He states, “It would be a very serious error to conclude . . . that the Church’s teaching is essentially only an ‘ideal’ which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated to the so-called concrete possibilities of man” (no. 103).³⁶ This establishes a distinct and objective rule beyond the merely subjective law adapted to man. John Paul II seeks to clarify that one cannot intentionally pursue such adaptation or propose a theory of conscience formation that would circumvent error. Yet, simultaneously, he points to the need to follow a sure judgment of conscience even if erroneous: “The judgment of conscience also has an imperative character: man must act in accordance with it. If man acts against this judgment or, in a case where he lacks certainty about the rightness and goodness of a

³⁵ Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, 128–129.

³⁶ The encyclical is quoting from John Paul II, “Address to Those Taking Part in a Course on ‘Responsible Parenthood,’” March 1, 1984, no. 4.

determined act, still performs that act, he stands condemned by his own conscience” (no. 60). This represents consistent church teaching and leads us to the final point from *Veritatis Splendor*, namely, the essential role of conscience formation in the moral life.

John Paul II stresses the importance of forming consciences. Referring to Matthew 6:22–23, “The eye is the lamp of the body,” he states: “The words of Jesus just quoted also represent a call to form our conscience, to make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good” (no. 64). This indicates the need to form conscience in accord with objective truth. Furthermore, John Paul II identifies the magisterium as a source for this formation: “Christians have a great help for the formation of conscience in the Church and her Magisterium. As the Council affirms: ‘In forming their consciences the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church’” (no. 64, quoting *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 14). This stands in contrast to views like Curran’s which elevate the subjective conscience at the expense of the objective standard and remove the foundation on which John Paul II bases conscience formation.

In summary, in response to various moral theories, *Veritatis Splendor* emphasizes the objective nature of conscience through the primacy of the moral object of the act in judging morality. While it briefly mentions the subjective nature of conscience, this discussion appears primarily in relation to the possibility of invincible ignorance and the importance of following a sure conscience even if invincibly ignorant.

AMORIS LAETITIA ON CONSCIENCE

Amoris Laetitia does not approach conscience from the point of view of fundamental moral theology as *Veritatis Splendor* does but from the point of view of the pastoral care of those who, without being validly married from the point of view of the church, cohabit and are in a romantic relationship. Accordingly, its teachings emphasize the subjective aspect of conscience to respond to the pastoral concerns such situations raise. While Francis reaffirms the objective nature of the moral law and thus of conscience, he expands significantly on John Paul II’s treatment in three ways through which we can read *Veritatis Splendor* anew: the presence of mitigating factors, the necessity of conscience formation, and judging whether a conscience errs due to vincible or invincible ignorance.

The Objectivity of Conscience Repeated

Francis reaffirms John Paul II's view on the objectivity of conscience without significant development, except for a slight difference in emphasis that implicitly responds to one of Curran's critiques of John Paul II. Francis declares, "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" (no. 297). Francis's use of "objective sin" seems to refer to actions whose object is morally illicit when viewed externally, thus affirming the principle of intrinsic evil. His reference to the "Christian ideal" seems to echo John Paul II's assertion that church law constitutes an objective standard for man, not merely an abstract ideal.

Regarding conscience's objectivity, Francis offers a modest development: "Given that gradualness is not in the law itself, this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church" (no. 300).³⁷ John Paul II does not talk about gradualness in this manner in *Veritatis Splendor* and, when he does, he focuses on the fact that we cannot have "different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 34). Rather than focusing on the external forum, Francis emphasizes how the law of gradualness must be part of moral discernment, which we could consider a slight development when compared to John Paul II's analysis. *Amoris Laetitia*'s treatment of gradualness bridges the objective and subjective dimensions, while the concern for not departing from truth, charity, or church teaching reinforces the objective aspect of conscience: a well-formed conscience judges in accord with "the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church" (no. 300). This affirmation of conscience's objective dimension stands in contrast to Curran's denial of the deontological aspect.

Regarding the objectivity of conscience, Curran argues that "John Paul II develops his understanding of conscience in terms of a legal model. Even references to the role of God and to the Holy Spirit . . . put the emphasis on law and obedience."³⁸ He then critiques this view as inadequate by noting that "the vast majority of our moral decisions are not made by reference to a law. The most important decisions in life—marriage partner, vocation, friends, coping with limitations, short-comings, and sufferings of human existence—are not made in

³⁷ Francis is here quoting from XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Finalis*, no. 86.

³⁸ Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, 127.

response to a law.”³⁹ Curran’s change of terms from “by reference to” to “in response to” is subtle but very significant. A young person does not choose a marriage partner in response to a law, but a good discernment of a marriage partner would be made with reference to various laws. For example, considering the sixth commandment, a person should ask whether the possible marriage partner would be faithful. It is true that we do not discern between ethical choices such as whether to join this or that religious community *in response to* a law. However, even in these cases, we must discern *by reference to* the law to be sure whether the options we are considering are moral: if the law were to describe one option as immoral, that would exclude it from good discernment. Nonetheless, there is a reasonable argument that John Paul II’s language is legalistic in his objectivity, which is why Francis’s use of the terminology of “Christian ideal” and “gradualness” is a welcome shift that helps us move away from excessive legalism in ethics while maintaining the objectivity of conscience. Thus, we can say that Francis indirectly responds to Curran’s critique of John Paul II.

Mitigating Factors on Conscience

Francis’s emphasis on the subjective dimension of conscience emerges clearly in his discussion of mitigating factors that can produce objectively erroneous yet subjectively certain consciences. This section will center on paragraph 305, its famous footnote 351, and paragraph 303 of *Amoris Laetitia*.

In paragraph 305, Francis articulates how mitigating factors can create an erroneous conscience: “Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such—a person can be living in God’s grace, can love, and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end” (no. 305). This observation illustrates the distinction between sin as an objective versus subjective act: sin is a violation of one’s conscience rather than merely an objectively incorrect action. Here, Francis organically develops John Paul II’s treatment of invincibly ignorant consciences, explaining both the distinction between objective and subjective culpability and identifying various factors that can cause this disparity.

Footnote 351 immediately follows the passage quoted in the prior paragraph. It states: “I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord’s

³⁹ Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, 128.

mercy' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 44). I would also point out that the Eucharist 'is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 47)" (no. 305, n351). While the main text indicates the potential presence of mitigating circumstances suggesting an invincibly ignorant conscience, the quoted passage from *Evangelii Gaudium* provides more specificity. Just before the "torture chamber" reference cited in this footnote, Francis enumerates several mitigating factors: "Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 44, quoting *Catechism*, no. 1735). As we can see, Francis's teachings provide a more detailed framework for understanding the subjective aspect of conscience, since whereas *Amoris Laetitia* describes what might constitute an invincibly ignorant conscience, *Veritatis Splendor* limits itself to affirming its possibility.

Paragraph 303 of *Amoris Laetitia* further develops this treatment of factors potentially causing invincible ignorance by acknowledging the validity of striving to follow conscience even when it is not in perfect alignment with objective reality. It states,

Conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal (no. 303).

While an imperfectly formed, and thus partially ignorant, conscience remains less than ideal, an effort to improve and follow one's conscience represents a positive moral development. This seems to extend the principles of *Dignitatis Humanae* regarding religious matters to broader moral matters. While this sentence can be interpreted as sanctioning the non-formation of conscience contrary to *Veritatis Splendor*, the context and additional statements in *Amoris Laetitia* indicate an ongoing call to pursue conscience formation. In fact, the paragraph simply addresses how mitigating circumstances affect culpability for objectively wrong actions by affirming that ignorant or erroneous consciences may render an individual inculpable for an objectively immoral action. Thus, we see how Francis elaborates on the subjective factors that can produce a fully or partially invincibly ignorant conscience. This development enables a more nuanced understanding of the possibility of invincible ignorance mentioned in *Veritatis Splendor*.

Forming Consciences

Amoris Laetitia establishes conscience formation as a foundational focus early on: “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (no. 37). This represents a significant pastoral development. Historically, pastoral practice often positioned the parish priest as the arbiter of all moral decisions down to judgments about reading popular literature. *Amoris Laetitia* suggests a more efficacious approach, namely, to form consciences so that people may make most moral decisions through their well-formed conscience rather than defaulting to pastoral consultation over routine moral questions. This demonstrates a subjective dimension in the gradual development of well-formed consciences, as opposed to a false objectivity where all moral decisions are predetermined.

Later, *Amoris Laetitia* quotes paragraph 1735 of the *Catechism* to explain how conscience can be malformed and uses it to list a second time the mitigating factors that appear in the passage from *Evangelii Gaudium* quoted in footnote 351. Francis employs this list of possible malformations to address the need for conscience formation: “Pastoral discernment, while taking into account a person’s properly formed conscience, must take responsibility for these situations. Even the consequences of actions taken are not necessarily the same in all cases” (no. 302).⁴⁰ While this paragraph addresses a specific point about marriage and family, it also establishes a broader principle: consciences must be formed within people’s concrete situations. Historical precedents demonstrate this point. For example, conscience formation of recently converted warriors in the Middle Ages started where they were with their existing ideal of heroic raiding parties. Furthermore, to use another historical example, St. Thorlak of Iceland in the twelfth century had to criticize the chieftain of the island for maintaining a formal marriage for the purpose of forging a political alliance while keeping a concubine (Thorlak’s sister) whom he genuinely loved.⁴¹ Although the island had converted to Christianity in recent generations, they still needed conscience formation. From this point of view, we could say that Francis describes the starting point of conscience formation while John Paul II limits his discussion to the endpoint. Both are needed, given that any formation process requires knowledge of both the start and endpoint. University classes present a good analogy where course goals give us a clear endpoint, and prerequisites give us a clear starting point. Although conscience

⁴⁰ Francis is here quoting XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Finalis*, no. 85.

⁴¹ Aimee O’Connell and John C. Wilhelmsson, *Thorlak of Iceland: Who Rose Above Autism to Become Patron Saint of His People* (Chaos To Order, 2018), 210.

formation is not as information-heavy as academic coursework, the same principle applies: understanding the current subjective state of the person as the starting point and the objectively well-formed conscience as the endpoint is essential for determining the appropriate formative path.

The subsequent paragraph begins by acknowledging “certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage” (no. 303). This serves as a starting point for discussing conscience formation: “Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one’s pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God’s grace” (no. 303). The conscience of the one forming can recognize that a certain situation, while objectively disordered, may represent the current limit of what can be asked of this individual. This principle manifests in confession where guiding someone towards objective morality, or the “ideal,” as Francis likes to say, may require incremental steps. Francis continues,

Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal (no. 303).

The paragraph concludes, “In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (no. 303). Ongoing discernment remains essential for moving persons toward the truth. Here, discernment appears linked to conscience formation, thus suggesting that continuous discernment functions as a synonym for conscience formation. Francis’s use of the word “ideal” differs from John Paul II’s. For both of them, in fact, the objective standard of the church’s law remains not merely as a lofty ideal expected only of canonized saints but an ideal towards which each person is guided.

The last relevant paragraph on conscience formation states, “A good ethical education includes showing a person that it is in his own interest to do what is right” (no. 265). This insight proves valuable because people are naturally inclined toward perceived good. Thus, people become more disposed to embrace conscience formation when they come to view it as beneficial, that is, as something connected to the larger goods of flourishing and beatitude.

To summarize, *Amoris Laetitia* significantly expands upon *Veritatis Splendor*'s treatment of conscience formation. While John Paul II simply notes Jesus's call to formation and the church's role in providing it, Francis addresses what this ongoing formation entails extensively. In particular, Francis emphasizes that conscience formation involves guiding rather than replacing consciences, that it must begin from where people are, and that conscience formation needs particular attention in complicated relationships. Overall, Francis demonstrates the importance of conscience's subjective dimension in formation, while reaffirming John Paul II's emphasis on the objective dimension rather than developing it further.

Judging Consciences

Amoris Laetitia illustrates the complexity of judging consciences via a specific example. Addressing the situation of romantic partners divorced and civilly "remarried," that is, cohabitating, it explains: "There are also the cases of . . . 'those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably broken marriage had never been valid'" (no. 298, quoting *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 84). This presents a case where subjective conscience judges a marriage invalid due to some defect. Whether this judgment proves correct or not, the annulment cannot be granted since marriage vows maintain the presumption of validity and cannot be nullified by information that cannot be proven publicly or to the proper officers in a canonical court. However, this example importantly demonstrates how conscience's judgments can diverge from externally visible realities. Although the person in the example cannot get remarried, the mere fact of their moral certainty in conscience may be either accurate or erroneous. Furthermore, if erroneous, whether it is the fruit of vincible or invincible ignorance remains unclear. Only through self-disclosure of conscience can we begin to understand the subjective culpability, and even then, certainty may continue to be elusive. For example, while it may appear that full knowledge of the moral law would preclude the possibility of an individual possessing invincible ignorance, one could maintain invincible ignorance regarding matters of fact—for example, their spouse's will against children on the wedding day—rather than matters of law. The inherent inaccessibility of internal subjective conscience to external observers exemplified here speaks to a broader principle about conscience's fundamentally private nature.

Francis also addresses the challenge faced by those with relatively well-formed and nevertheless still weak consciences. *Amoris Laetitia* observes: "Often we prove inconsistent in our own convictions,

however firm they may be; even when our conscience dictates a clear moral decision, other factors sometimes prove more attractive and powerful” (no. 265). The process does not end with conscience formation; rather, conscience’s judgments must become actualized in concrete decisions leading to specific actions. This observation cautions against judging other people’s consciences harshly based solely on external factors by acknowledging the universal weakness caused by concupiscence. Concupiscence often clouds conscience’s clarity, and even the greatest saints experience it. St. Therese of Lisieux, for example, noted how her concupiscence manifested in excessive fear of abandonment or rejection in childhood, requiring grace to eventually overcome this tendency.⁴² Nevertheless, human beings generally maintain an awareness of the guidance of conscience and its judgment. While they can perceive their own conscience’s subjectivity, they remain unable to perceive or access the conscience of another. This constitutes a return to the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (no. 16). Conscience remains our most intimate and inaccessible dimension, even if a judgment is sometimes possible based on what persons ought to know in conscience. For instance, in cases of theft or rape, it is reasonable to conclude that the perpetrator is culpable, as they ought to know those acts are immoral, and their conscience ought to have judged them accordingly. Still, there remains an essential challenge in judging consciences that highlights the fundamentally private interior nature of each conscience, which constitutes an essential aspect of its subjectivity. Individual consciences may be misinformed on moral law and relevant facts or clouded by concupiscence. Such realities require that we exercise charity in our judgments.

Objections

Several objections or points of disagreement have been noted in the preliminaries and are better addressed in literature specifically focused on those preliminary topics. For example, not all scholars agree with such a strong hermeneutic of continuity in reading these documents, but that question precedes the central argument of this essay and is thus presumed. However, one objection specific to this analysis of *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia* warrants consideration.

⁴² Paul C. Vitz and Christina P. Lynch, “Thérèse of Lisieux from the Perspective of Attachment Theory and Separation Anxiety,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2007), doi.org/10.1080/10508610709336854.

It is important to address the quasi-magisterial status Francis gave to the Argentinian bishops' guidelines on *Amoris Laetitia*. Francis approved this interpretation in a letter and published both that letter and the guidelines in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*.⁴³ These guidelines largely directed priests to discern subjective consciences with individuals. While this significantly affects some aspects of interpreting *Amoris Laetitia*, it seems to have little effect on the argument presented herein. Conscience appears only twice in these guidelines. First, when the Argentinian bishops write that "it is always important to guide people to stand before God with their conscience,"⁴⁴ a statement that affirms and largely promotes the objective understanding of conscience John Paul II emphasizes and Francis reaffirms. Second, conscience is used in reference to doing an "examination of conscience" after divorce, which does not really affect the arguments presented in the essay.

There is debate about whether some of the claims in the guidelines' sixth paragraph may negate the objective aspect of conscience. There, the Argentinian bishops offer "the possibility of having access to the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist" for couples where one party is divorced and civilly remarried if "there are limitations that mitigate responsibility and culpability."⁴⁵ Three responses to this possible objection are appropriate. First, the sacramental discipline recommended by the guidelines does not seem to directly affect the argument in this article, as the Argentinian bishops maintain Francis's emphasis on subjective conscience in a productive tension with John Paul II's treatment of objective conscience. At no point, in fact, do the guidelines deny objective conscience. Second, reading one paragraph of a magisterial document in opposition to another rather than finding a way to harmonize them contradicts the very hermeneutic of continuity that, this essay argues, is the only correct way of thinking about the relationship between different papal teachings. Third, considering that the guidelines state that the scenario in paragraph six refers to situations in which complete continence is not possible, it seems likely that this paragraph describes a situation where only one

⁴³ Cindy Wooden, "Pope's Letter to Argentine Bishops on *Amoris Laetitia* Part of Official Record," *National Catholic Reporter / Catholic News Service*, December 5, 2017, www.ncronline.org/vatican/popes-letter-argentine-bishops-amoris-laetitia-part-official-record.

⁴⁴ Bishops of the Buenos Aires Pastoral Region, "Basic Criteria for the Implementation of Chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia*," no. 8. Translation: Crux staff, "Guidelines of Buenos Aires Bishops on Divorced/Remarried," September 16, 2016, cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/09/guidelines-buenos-aires-bishops-divorcedremarried. Original in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 108, no. 10 (October 2016): 1074.

⁴⁵ Bishops of the Buenos Aires Pastoral Region, "Basic Criteria," no. 6, AAS 108, no. 10, 1073.

of the two romantic partners wants to conform to church teaching. For instance, a divorced and remarried individual might face a dilemma where their partner threatens to leave the family if sexual relations cease. In such a case, the individual seeking continence must confront the challenge of having to choose between their desire to follow what the church teaches and the potential financial and emotional hardship that would fall on their children if the partnership were to end.

The later part of the paragraph provides further indication that this suggested interpretation and, accordingly, the document is opening the possibility of accessing the sacraments to an individual member of the couple rather than both parties. In fact, the document states that access to the sacraments is a possibility “when a *person* believes he/she would incur a subsequent fault by harming the children of the new union.”⁴⁶ Such a situation raises difficult questions about whether, from the standpoint of objective Christian morality, a person can morally accept sexual advances of their legal but not real or sacramental spouse for the sake of protecting their children. However, considering and responding to this question is beyond the scope of this article and does not directly affect its central claims.

CONCLUSION

Veritatis Splendor has served its purpose well by arguing against proportionalism and other subjectivist moral theories that started in the 1960s and continue even today. While it still remains relevant, the twenty-first century has seen a return of an earlier error wherein morality is overly objectified, failing to consider the subjective experience of the one committing an immoral act, which actually constitutes a sin. Accordingly, *Amoris Laetitia* responds more to this latter tendency, but the combination of these two documents provides the balance necessary to maintain the center of Catholic theology. *Amoris Laetitia* provides a more subjective lens through which the objective truths *Veritatis Splendor* emphasizes can be viewed.

Contrary to views that would consider the moral theology of John Paul II surpassed, the approaches of the two documents to conscience are in tension but not contradictory. Everything *Amoris Laetitia* says regarding conscience demonstrates that it intends to clarify against over-objectification rather than eliminate the objectivity of conscience. In fact, although Francis expands on the subjective aspect of conscience in *Amoris Laetitia*, he also reaffirms the objective one. Reading *Amoris Laetitia* as denying the objective conscience expressed in *Veritatis Splendor* it explicitly confirms contradicts both

⁴⁶ Bishops of the Buenos Aires Pastoral Region, “Basic Criteria,” no. 6, AAS 108, no. 10, 1073 (emphasis added).

a hermeneutic of continuity and a reasonable and coherent reading of the exhortation's text.

The goal of *Amoris Laetitia* is to be concrete and specific and thus avoid abstractions: when discussing malformed consciences, for example, it cites more than once a list of possible causes for the distortion of conscience rather than merely mentioning the possibility that malformation may exist. Emphasizing the starting point in conscience formation helps illuminate the path better than knowing only the endpoint. Together, *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia* demonstrate the constant tension between the objective and subjective aspects of conscience and provide a fuller understanding of conscience than either document alone could offer. **M**

Matthew P. Schneider, SThD, is a priest with the Legionaries of Christ and will be joining the faculty and formation team at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Connecticut. He holds a Sacred Theology Doctorate in Moral Theology from the Pontifical Atheneum Regina Apostolorum in Rome. He has written widely, including *God Loves the Autistic Mind: Prayer Guide for Those on the Spectrum and Those Who Love Us* (Pauline, 2022), which won an award from the Association of Catholic Publishers.