Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 14, Special Issue 1 (2025): 132–155

Moral Law and Pastoral Praxis from *Veritatis Splendor* to the Magisterium of Francis

Gustavo Irrazábal

Abstract: Thirty years ago, Pope John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* confronted what it considered a moral crisis in which freedom, understood as autonomy without limits, led to the denial of the objective truth, especially the truth of revelation and natural law. Therefore, it strongly reaffirmed the relationship of faith to moral law and the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts, unlawful in all circumstances. The text rejected so-called "pastoral solutions," which postulated exceptions to moral absolutes by exaggerating the singularity of concrete situations. Pope Francis's magisterium addresses a different problem: the inherent complexity and fragility of the human condition in this world. For this reason, he is primarily concerned with the dangers of rigorism and legalism, as can be seen in the exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*. The declaration *Dignitas Infinita*, with its unconditional condemnation of acts that violate human dignity, may open a way for overcoming the tension between the teachings of the two pontiffs and contributing to a renewal of moral theology and pastoral praxis which avoids the danger of both rigorism and overburdening personal consciences for lack of clear normative references.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, THROUGH HIS ENCYCLICAL *VERITATIS Splendor*, John Paul II attempted to establish the limits of theological discussion and redirect the process of moral renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council, especially by confirming the traditional doctrine on the existence of intrinsically evil acts, that is, acts considered illicit whatever the intention or circumstances.

This encyclical was passionately questioned by some and defended by others, deepening divisions among moral theologians. Only exhaustion and the multiplication of disciplinary measures succeeded in calming tensions, albeit in a more apparent than real way. Following the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, moral revisionism emerged with bolder proposals, which reflected the ever growing cultural and moral pluralism of western societies. In this context, the direction given to the moral magisterium by Pope Francis, characterized

by a more pastoral than doctrinal approach to moral issues, and his silence on *Veritatis Splendor* and the *intrinsece malum*, may give the impression that the latter are already part of the past.

In the present article, I argue that there is a profound tension between the two pontiffs in the moral field, evidenced in the fact that John Paul II rejects "pastoral solutions" while Francis resorts to them. This contrast shows that the question of how to reconcile doctrinal objectivity and pastoral prudence in the face of concrete situations has not yet been satisfactorily resolved. Consequently, confrontations have arisen between those who consider that the emphasis on the former entails a danger of rigorism and those who believe that insistence on the latter leads to disorder.

In the first two parts of my paper, I will compare some teachings of *Veritatis Splendor* with Francis's exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* to illustrate the main aspects of this conflict. In the last part, I intend to show that the declaration *Dignitas Infinita* constitutes an effort of the present pontificate to show continuity with the preceding official teaching regarding moral absolutes while seeking a new synthesis, more context-sensitive, based on the unique dignity of all human beings and their fundamental rights.

VERITATIS SPLENDOR: RESPONSE TO A MORAL CRISIS

Veritatis Splendor arose from a controversial diagnosis.[1] According to this encyclical, Catholic morality is threatened by "a genuine crisis" (no. 5), described as "a new situation . . . within the Christian community itself, which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church's moral teachings" (no. 4). At its root, this is "a crisis of truth" (no. 32), which has resulted in a confusion between good and evil, caused by the influence of certain "currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth" (no. 4).

[1] Questioning this diagnosis, Maura Anne Ryan observes: "I grant that there is a worrisome moral subjectivity in the air. . . . It is difficult, however, to find his description of the cultural crisis facing the church today persuasive. . . . For one thing, 'culture' is a far more complex phenomenon than this encyclical grants" ("'*Then Who Can be Saved?*' *Ethics and Ecclesiology in* Veritatis Splendor," in Veritatis Splendor*: American Responses*, ed. M. E. Allsopp and J. J. O'Keefe [Sheed & Ward, 1995], 11). For Servais Pinckaers, on the other hand, "c'est incontestablement la crise de la morale qui s'est développée dans l'Église et dans la société depuis un quart de siècle" ("It is unquestionably the crisis of morality that has developed in the Church and in society over the last quarter century"), *Pour une lecture de* Veritatis Splendor (Mame, 1995), 9.

In view of this increasingly relativistic mentality, the encyclical confirms the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts, that is, acts illicit *semper et pro semper*, whatever the intention that inspires them or the circumstances in which they are performed. In this regard, the correlation between eternal life, commandments and the beatitudes (chapter one), and Christian moral anthropology (chapter two) are seen respectively as the biblical and philosophical foundations of the existence of those negative precepts and constitute the rationale for the rejection of so-called "pastoral solutions" (chapter three).

The Commandments as "the Beginning of Freedom" (no. 13)

In his double response to the Rich Young Man's question about eternal life, Jesus connects the obedience to the commandments to the call to follow him (Matthew 19:16–21; *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 19–21). *Veritatis Splendor* relies on this biblical text to formulate the delicate relationship between the natural order reflected in the commandments and the order of grace contained in the Sermon on the Mount.

According to St. Augustine, the commandments are "the *first necessary step on the journey towards freedom,* its starting point, the beginning of freedom" (no. 13). It is, nevertheless, in the Sermon on the Mount, the "*magna carta*" of Gospel morality, where Jesus shows that the commandments should not be understood just as a minimum limit not to be exceeded, but rather as a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love (no. 15).

Considering the intimate and reciprocal link between the commandments and the Beatitudes, the document intends to go beyond the dialectics between law and freedom. Jesus's invitation to the young man ("come, follow me") reveals "the particular dynamic of freedom's growth towards maturity, and at the same time *they bear witness to the fundamental relationship between freedom and divine law.* Human freedom and God's law are not in opposition; on the contrary, they appeal one to the other" (no. 17).

Moral Law and Intrinsically Evil Acts

The second chapter lays out the anthropological and moral foundations of the commandments as negative precepts valid *semper et pro semper* (nos. 52, 82). Christian ethics is "teleological" in the sense that it conceives the moral goodness of an action as its conformity with the perfection of the person. This conformity is grasped by reason in the very being of each person, considered in their integral truth, and therefore in their natural inclinations, which always have a spiritual dimension as well. The ordered structure of "personal

goods" apprehended by reason in light of the "good of the person" constitutes the universal and immutable contents of natural law (no. 79).

Prudence always has the task of verifying whether positive precepts are to be applied or not in a specific situation; however, negative precepts, which prohibit certain concrete actions as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception, because choosing them involves a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1761). These acts, which contradict the good of the person made in God's image, are by their very nature "incapable of being ordered" to God on account of their very object, quite apart from the ulterior intentions and the circumstances (no. 79).

The So-Called "Pastoral Solutions"

John Paul II is aware that the uncompromising affirmation of absolute prohibitions can be objected to for its supposed rigidity, that is, for its inability to adapt to the complexity of human life. On the other hand, he recognizes that, as martyrdom attests, "maintaining a harmony between freedom and truth occasionally demands uncommon sacrifices and must be won at a high price" (no. 102).

However, the overcoming of temptation and sin and the fulfillment of the law of God are always possible with the help of divine grace and the collaboration of human freedom. It would be a grave error to think that the Gospel is nothing but an "ideal" to be adapted to "the so-called concrete possibilities" of the individual, because these possibilities are not those of persons dominated by concupiscence but of persons redeemed by Christ (no. 103). True mercy is the understanding for human weakness, but not the pretension of making this weakness the criterion of the truth about the good. The latter is precisely an expression of Pharisaism which seeks to eliminate awareness of one's own limits and sin. "In our own day this attitude is expressed particularly in the attempt to adapt the moral norm to one's own capacities and personal interests, and even in the rejection of the very idea of a norm" (no. 105).

The most direct practical consequence of this vision, although formulated earlier in the encyclical, can now be understood in all its significance, namely, the rejection of so-called "pastoral solutions:"

> In order to justify these positions (i.e., the "creative" understanding of conscience), some authors have proposed a kind of double status of moral truth. Beyond the doctrinal and abstract level, one would have to acknowledge the priority of a certain more concrete existential consideration. The latter, by taking account of circumstances and the

> situation, could legitimately be the basis of certain *exceptions to the general rule* and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept. (no. 56)

According to the encyclical, consistency between moral doctrine and pastoral praxis demands a rejection of "exceptions to the general rule," understood as attempts to justify the performance of intrinsically evil acts. The objective moral requirement in the concrete case is an application of universal norms, and pastoral action must be limited to accompanying people in their efforts to respond to this requirement. *Veritatis Splendor* does not consider the possibility that the interpretation of the general norm might need some revision in the light of the particular situation.

FRANCIS'S NEW APPROACH: *GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE*

Having briefly presented the contents of *Veritatis Splendor* relevant to our scope, the second part of this paper addresses the novelties Pope Francis brings to the process of moral renewal. To this end, the exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* constitutes a good starting point.[2] In fact, this document refers directly and indirectly to numerous fundamental themes of *Veritatis Splendor* (although, surprisingly, without quoting it even once), and does so with clearly different accents, reflecting a shift in the Catholic magisterium.

In addition, the second chapter, entitled "The Enemies of Holiness," which differs in its tone from the rest, is a remarkably harsh condemnation of "contemporary Gnosticism and Pelagianism" that reflect "a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism," distinctive of those who, instead of evangelizing, exhaust their energies in inspecting and verifying (no. 35). Considering these polemical labels (which should not be interpreted in a technical sense),[3] it is difficult to avoid the

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[2] Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

[3] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Placuit Deo*, March 1, 2018, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180222_placuit-deo_en.html. With reference to the deviations "to which the Holy

impression that they are mainly addressed to those who consider Francis's moral magisterium as conflicting with *Veritatis Splendor* and, especially, its teaching about intrinsically evil acts.[4]

Beatitudes and Commandments

Chapter three of *Gaudete et Exsultate* is mostly dedicated to the Beatitudes, the fundamental dispositions that characterize the believer's lifestyle and concretize his or her configuration with the Lord (no. 63). Compared to *Veritatis Splendor* (no. 16), much more attention is devoted in this exhortation to the Beatitudes, including a meditation on each of them (nos. 66–94). It is true that the former insists on the call to perfection, interpreted in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount; but, at the same time, it stresses the importance of the commandments as "the first and indispensable condition for having eternal life" (no. 17). Perfection entails the dynamic of freedom's growth towards maturity in self-giving, which requires a fundamental relationship between freedom and divine law (no. 17), even though the Beatitudes, as basic attitudes, do not coincide exactly with the commandments (no. 16).

On the other hand, the concern for obedience to the commandments, central to *Veritatis Splendor,* is not explicitly present in *Gaudete et Exsultate*. While "obedience" is mentioned twenty-seven times in *Veritatis Splendor,* it appears just once in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, as "obedience to the Gospel" (no. 173), not specifically to God's law. This may be explained by considering that the problem faced by *Gaudete et Exsultate* is not a crisis of moral life caused by the relativization of the commandments, but their absolutization by rigorist sectors, who seek to apply them without considering the peculiarity of different situations, as well as the limits and difficulties of many believers.

In *Gaudete et Exsultate,* the centrality of the commandment of love is frequently pointed out (nos. 55; 92; 154) to warn about the dangers of legalism: the "obsession with the law" (no. 57), "the thicket of

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Father Francis has often referred," that is, neo-Pelagianism and neo-Gnosticism, this letter points out that "the comparison with the Pelagian and Gnostic heresies refers only to general common features, without entering into judgments on the exact nature of the ancient errors," bearing in mind that the difference between the secularized historical context of today and that of the first Christian centuries, in which these heresies were born, is great, for which reason the text limits itself to pointing out "a certain familiarity" with some contemporary movements (no. 3).

[4] As one example among many: W. Brandmüller, R. Burke, C. Caffarra, and J. Meisner, "Seeking Clarity: A Plea to Untie the Knots in *Amoris Laetitia*," September 19, 2016, www.ncregister.com/news/four-cardinals-formally-ask-pope-for-clarity-on-amoris-laetitia, especially no. 2.

precepts and prescriptions," and the insufficiency of the "norms of the law" (nos. 49; 58; 59; 104; 134). The main task is to open for believers a breach in the middle of the dense "thicket" of norms that "weigh down and block" progress along the path to holiness (no. 62).

The obsession with the law can take "various shapes" (no. 62), which may sometimes lead to a selective and individualistic approach to Christian life. In chapter 3, dedicated to the Beatitudes, Francis identifies the tendency to focus exclusively on a few moral issues and ignore many others of no less importance, especially in social matters, as one of the "ideological errors" which distort the ethical meaning of the Gospel:

> The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist, or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. (no. 101)

If the point of departure in *Veritatis Splendor* is the obedience to God's law, which stresses the dynamism toward the perfection of the Beatitudes, *Gaudete et Exsultate* regards the Beatitudes as the guide to a comprehensive understanding of moral requirements, in their individual and social aspects, in the light of charity. Each of these approaches entails its own potential risks. Excessive insistence on obedience to God's law may reduce grace to a mere aid to ethical effort. On the other hand, the lack of an explicit and positive encouragement to obey the commandments, together with the multiplication of warnings about the dangers of legalism, can downplay the importance of moral norms in providing ethical content to the Beatitudes.

Francis and Intrinsically Evil Acts

The reluctance of *Gaudete et Exsultate* to include an explicit statement on the significance of the commandments suggests an intention to revisit the centrality of the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts as proposed in *Veritatis Splendor*. In this regard, *Gaudete et Exsultate* must be interpreted in continuity with the eighth chapter of

Amoris Laetitia, which deals with "irregular" situations.[5] In fact, under the title "Norms and Discernment" it says: "It is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual's actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being" (no. 304). Francis also resorts to a traditional argument: the formulation of general norms cannot cover absolutely all situations, so that the possibility of exceptions ("failures of the principle") should always be considered (no. 304).

For Francis, the main concern clearly shifts from the defense of the absolute character of the moral requirement to the problem of how to apply moral norms in different contexts. However, in order to adopt this more sensitive approach both to the complexity of particular situations and the pastoral demands of "accompanying, discerning, and integrating weaknesses," it is necessary to resist the temptation of rigid systematization. As *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 44, indicates:

> In effect, doctrine, or better, our understanding and expression of it, "is not a closed system, devoid of the dynamic capacity to pose questions, doubts, inquiries. . . . The questions of our people, their suffering, their struggles, their dreams, their trials, and their worries, all possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder, their questions question us."

Ethics of Spiritual Discernment

The relative silence on the commandments, the multiplication of cautious references to norms in general and the rejection of what is considered a "closed system," alien to real life, undoubtedly imply a distance from the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts as set forth in *Veritatis Splendor*.

In John Paul II's encyclical, the idea of discernment is present, firstly, as the ability of the person to know the difference between good and evil expressed in moral law, empowered by faith (nos. 2, 42, 44). However, the discernment of the faithful must take place within the framework of the discernment reserved to the magisterium of the church (nos. 5, 27–28, 30, 34, 74, 85, 110, 115), responsible for distinguishing the positive and negative aspects of the prevailing culture and the compatibility of theological theories and currents with

[5] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

revelation, relying on the assistance of specialists in its task of guiding the faithful (nos. 112–113).

This restricted vision of discernment is based on the concept of conscience the encyclical recalls: "The application of the law to each particular case, which thus becomes for man an interior *dictum*, a call to do good in a concrete situation" (no. 59). The dignity of this rational instance and the authority of its voice and judgments derive from the truth about moral good and evil indicated by divine law, the universal and objective norm of morality (no. 60). The encyclical thus rejects what it calls the "creative" interpretation of moral conscience, which disregards the binding character of the moral law and relegates it to the role of a "*general perspective*" that guides the person in making their own "*decisions*" (i.e., no longer *applicative* judgments) in the face of the alleged unrepeatability of particular situations the general norm could never foresee (no. 55).

The contrast with *Gaudete et Exsultate* is clear, beginning with the fact that *Gaudete et Exsultate* devotes an entire chapter to the topic of discernment (chapter five). It introduces a broader concept, the habit of *spiritual* discernment, a notion of Pauline origin (Rom 12:1–3), modernly developed by the Jesuit tradition, to which all believers are called, in order to recognize the ways of the Spirit of God, whose logic contrasts with the spirit of this world (nos. 23, 62, 105, 150, 166–170, 172–175).[6] The mature Christian allows himself to be led by the Spirit of God (Gal 5:21).

As Francis states, discernment requires "obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it" (no. 173). Even so:

> It is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances and what was useful in one context may not prove so in another. The discernment of spirits liberates us from rigidity, which has no place before the perennial "today" of the risen Lord. The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light (no. 173).

In this way, spiritual discernment opens a greater space of freedom for consideration, in light of the Spirit, of the complexity of concrete situations.

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[6] On the implications of this method for the Synod on Synodality and Christian life, see Vimal Tirimanna, "Listening to the Voice of the Holy Spirit. The Current Synodal Process and a Few Implications for Moral Theology," *Studia Moralia* 61, no. 2 (2023): 249–278.

The tension between the rejection of "creative" conscience in *Veritatis Splendor* and the remarkable flexibility of spiritual discernment of particular situations proposed in *Gaudete et Exsultate* leads us, once more, to the problem of how to mediate between general principles and their practical application.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN DOCTRINE AND PASTORAL CARE AND THEIR RESPECTIVE DEMANDS

The new emphases of Francis's magisterium significantly alter the way of approaching so-called "pastoral solutions," shifting from the suspicion of *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 56, to the re-entry of such practices through the wide door of the Pauline doctrine of spiritual discernment. How to avoid the danger of the "double status of moral truth" about which John Paul II's encyclical warned?

For *Veritatis Splendor*, the only way to prevent the separation between the doctrinal and pastoral level is to conceive of the latter as the deductive application of the former. Once the moral requirement for the concrete case has been determined, pastoral care seeks to attenuate the impact of its rigor in the personal life of believers through practices of pastoral benignity. But mercy towards the person must be accompanied by intransigence towards evil (no. 95). The understanding of human weakness "never means compromising and falsifying the standard of good and evil in order to adapt it to particular circumstances" (no. 104).

Francis, on the other hand, invokes mercy to devote an attention to particular situations unprecedented in pontifical teaching, seeking to affirm *simultaneously* the validity of the general doctrine and the irreducible importance of each case, without giving priority to one or the other or providing any general formula to reconcile these two premises other than the case by case solution and the importance of the "small step" in the face of one's human limits (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 3, 44).

However, while recognizing the hermeneutical role of mercy for decision in the concrete case, Francis's insistence on "shielding" doctrine from any possibility of revision introduces a degree of tension in various topics that threatens to disarticulate theory and practice, with negative consequences for the consistency and doctrinal authority of the magisterium.

Many examples could be cited in which Francis's magisterium introduces a strong tension between the current doctrine and the proposed pastoral approach. One of the most polemical is, undoubtedly, the one developed in the eighth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia.* In this chapter, the pope begins by confirming the church's traditional teaching on marriage (no. 292). However, he then tries to

reconcile this doctrine with "the logic of integration" (no. 299) key to his pastoral view and which he considers the only possible alternative to the logic of marginalization ("casting off," no. 296).

To achieve this end, the text resorts to two different strategies. The first, as mentioned above, consists in recognizing the possibility of exceptions to the general rules due to their indeterminacy (no. 304; ST I-II, q. 94, a. 4), an argument used recurrently in the past against the doctrine of intrinsically bad acts. This could mean that there may be "irregular" situations that contradict the general formulation of the rule but, because of "particular circumstances," are not really subsumed into it and, therefore, always in an analogical sense, can be considered exceptions.

Amoris Laetitia, however, does not further explore this path, which could lead to doctrinal debates (for example, the correct interpretation of the indissolubility of marriage). It strives, instead, to clarify that "personal and pastoral discernment" can never dispense with the demands of truth and charity of the Gospel proposed by the church, since "in the law itself there is no gradualness" (no. 300).

Having closed for itself the doctrinal path suggested in the first term, this document leans towards the consideration of "extenuating circumstances" of responsibility, such as eventual ignorance of the norm or difficulty "in understanding its inherent values" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 301; *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 33), or even the fact that the person is "in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 301).[7] Due to these 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" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305). The latter, "in certain cases, could also be the help of the sacraments" (n351). It seems that the argument of "extenuating circumstances" is considered more conducive to the purpose of widening the room of freedom for discernment.

In any case, the document fails in its attempt to avoid questioning the doctrine while offering, at the same time, a "pastoral solution" to the problem of the communion of people in "irregular" situations. According to this text, pastoral mercy, in contrast to *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 56, would make it possible to admit decisions that, while contrasting with the general norm, are *correct* (for the particular case), *or* objectively *incorrect* but subjectively conditioned. In any case, it does not foresee the possibility of mercy fulfilling any function in the

[7] It is not clear, in the latter case (impossibility to act otherwise), in what sense it is still possible to speak of "guilt" and "objective situation of sin."

doctrinal field, so that the danger of separation from pastoral praxis remains.[8]

FROM INTRINSIC MORALITY OF ACTS TO INTRINSIC HUMAN DIGNITY

An important novelty for overcoming the tensions mentioned above and highlighting the basic continuity between the magisterium of John Paul II and that of Francis may be found in the Declaration *Dignitas Infinita*.[9] In analyzing this declaration, it is useful to keep in mind some recent events, such as the *Synodale Weg* (2021–2024) in the German Church, the new set of *dubia* presented to the pope in 2023 regarding the blessing of same-sex couples,[10] and the publication of *Fiducia Supplicans*, which allowed "pastoral blessings" under strict conditions, and has encountered opposition from many local churches.[11] Comparing the present historical context with that of the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX (1864), Bernard Brady observes: "Today the church feels itself under siege not by armies or angry crowds storming the Vatican palace, but rather by ideas about sex, sexuality, and gender—both from the wider social context and from Catholics themselves. Addressing these issues appears to be the genesis of the document."[12]

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[8] Some ethicists believe that the anthropological and methodological developments of *Amoris Laetitia* (for example, its inductive method, appreciation for historical consciousness, culture, social conditions, etc.) may lay "the foundation for an organic development of doctrine that can effect doctrinal change" (Todd Salzmann and Michael Lawler, "*Amoris Laetitia*: Towards a Methodological and Anthropological Integration of Catholic Social and Sexual Ethics," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 [2018]: 634–652, 651, doi.org/10.1177/0040563918784772). For the reasons mentioned above, the pope seems to have ruled out this path.

[9] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dignitas Infinita*, August 4, 2024, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html.

[10] "Dubia" of two Cardinals (July 10, 2023) and "Responses" of the Holy Father (July 11, 2023), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_risposta-dubia-2023.pdf.

The full text of the responses was released by the Vatican on October 2, 2023. See also footnote no. 20.

[11] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, December 18, 2023, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html. The negative reactions to this text were followed by a "Press Release Concerning the Reception of *Fiducia supplicans*," January 4, 2024, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240104_comunicato-fiducia-supplicans_en.html, and a clarification by Pope Francis in his address to the Plenary Session of this Dicastery, on January 26, 2024, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/january/documents/20240126-plenaria-ddf.html.

[12] Bernard V. Brady, "*Dignitas Infinita*: A Syllabus of Errors for the 21st Century?," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 7.

The unresolved debate on the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts, frequently restricted to personal ethics in spite of the social sins mentioned in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27, and *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80, lurks beneath all these problems. In fact, it was only thanks to Francis's personal intervention that the initial drafts of *Dignitas Infinita*, which focused on sex and gender issues, were followed by others applying the foundational concept of human dignity to broader contemporary social issues. The need to revisit the doctrine of intrinsically evil acts, its meaning and extension, may account for the special importance the pope ascribed to the document. This importance is perceptible in the document's lengthy drafting process[13] and the degree of the pope's direct involvement.

For example, as the preface of the declaration indicates, *Dignitas Infinita* develops the anthropological foundations of human dignity in the first three sections and seeks to clarify its true meaning. It begins with a historical approach and describes the "gradual awareness" of the unique dignity of each human being in classical antiquity (no. 10), the Bible (nos. 11–12), Christian thought, and the present era (nos. 14–16). The second section presents the proclamation of the church, expressed in a "threefold conviction:" the dignity of every human being comes from their creation in the image of God (no. 18), their elevation through the Mystery of the Incarnation of Christ (no. 19), and His Resurrection, which reveals our ultimate destiny (nos. 20–21). The third section explores how this dignity becomes the objective basis for human freedom, with its rights and duties (no. 25) in relation to others (no. 26) and the "creaturely goodness of the rest of the cosmos" (no. 28), although freedom needs to be liberated from "negative influences in the moral and social spheres," such as moral relativism or social injustice, which may compromise its exercise (nos. 29–32). Finally, the fourth section indicates some current situations in which this dignity is not sufficiently recognized.

Overall, on the one hand, *Dignitas Infinita* intends to reaffirm the doctrine of moral absolutes stated in *Veritatis Splendor*. This explains why the declaration goes to great lengths to highlight its continuity with the magisterium of John Paul II. His name appears nineteen times

[13] An initial draft of the text was prepared in 2019 but rejected and replaced by another one elaborated *ex novo* and presented on October 4, 2021. The latter, in an amended version, was approved in November 2023. Afterwards, at the pope's request, "a new and significantly modified version" followed and was finally approved in February 2024. According to the prefect, Víctor Fernández, "the five-year course of the text's preparation helps us to understand that the document before us reflects the gravity and centrality of the theme of dignity in Christian thought. The text required a considerable process of maturation to arrive at the final version that we have published today." This long preparation stands in stark contrast to the hasty drafting process of *Fiducia Supplicans*.

throughout the text. The "infinite" character of human dignity is taken from an informal remark of that pope during an apostolic visit to Germany, although it undoubtedly constitutes a hyperbole and must be understood in a relative sense.[14] The declaration also stresses the coincidence between Francis and his predecessor regarding the importance of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and its foundation in human dignity (nos. 23, 64). Moreover, it is no coincidence that the declaration was presented on April 2, 2024, on the nineteenth anniversary of St. John Paul II's death. This insistence is relevant to understand Pope Francis's intentions.

On the other hand, *Dignitas Infinita* introduces an important epistemological and methodological development of the notion of human dignity as the anthropological foundation of Catholic moral teaching. The document begins by saying: "An infinite dignity, which is inalienably grounded in his own being, belongs to every human person, beyond all circumstances and in whatever state or situation he may find himself" (no. 1). The ontological dignity of the human person, accessible to reason and confirmed by revelation, is the foundation of the church's commitment to the weakest and her insistence "on the primacy of the human person and the defense of his dignity beyond all circumstances" (no. 1).

The idea of the ontological dignity of every human being, which "is indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances" (no. 7), is repeated insistently throughout the document. The expression "beyond all circumstances" and its equivalents are repeated sixteen times; the dignity of the person "regardless," or "independent of," any other consideration appears fourteen times. Whereas the adjective "intrinsic" in *Veritatis Splendor always* relates to acts, it is *exclusively* referred to human dignity in *Dignitas Infinita*.

This shift may seem irrelevant at first glance since John Paul II resorts to analogous terms to render the idea of the unconditionality of human dignity (*Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 90, 92, 97), and both popes believe that the exceptionless evil nature of certain acts is determined

[14] Pope John Paul II, "Angelus with the Disabled in the Cathedral Church of Osnabrück," November 16, 1980, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19801116.html. Francis had already quoted these words in *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 178. According to Edward Feser, "John Paul II's remark was merely a passing comment made in the course of a little-known informal address of little magisterial weight that was devoted to another topic. It was not a carefully worded formal theological treatment of the nature of human dignity, specifically" ("Two Problems with *Dignitas Infinita*," April 11, 2024), edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2024/04/two-problems-with-dignitas-infinita.html. In any case, the incomparable and unique dignity of the human person has been one of the central themes of the magisterium of John Paul II from its inception in *Redemptor Hominis*.

by their incompatibility with that dignity. Nevertheless, the fact that *Dignitas Infinita* aims to provide a list of acts that must be considered illicit regardless of the circumstances while carefully avoiding any reference to the traditional expression "intrinsically evil acts" which pervades previous moral teachings and doctrinal debates should not be overlooked. There are reasons to think that the declaration, by systematically reserving the term "intrinsic" to the human person and its dignity, hints at the intention to reconsider some aspects of these notions and their relevance for the foundation of ethical norms. As a result, as we shall see in what follows, the existence of evil acts without exceptions is confirmed but, at the same time, more clearly framed within an enriched doctrine of human dignity, which must be respected without exception. This probably represents the long overdue response to a widespread concern about Francis's magisterium.[15]

HUMAN DIGNITY AS A FOURFOLD CONCEPT

The concept of human dignity, despite its basic continuity with the previous magisterium, is deepened and enhanced in this declaration. In fact, it conceives human dignity as a multilayered concept. In the first place, the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and endowed with a "rational" nature (which includes the capacity to understand and love, and the corporeal functions closely related to it) has, as stated above, an *ontological* dignity (nos. 9, 11–13). But human dignity also includes other dimensions: *moral* dignity, referred to "how people exercise their freedom" before the demands of the law of love (no. 7); *social* dignity, that is, "the quality of the person's living conditions," impacted by social structures (no. 8), and *existential* dignity, "implied in the ever-increasing discussion about a 'dignified' life and one that is 'not dignified'" (no. 8). In one sense, human dignity is equal in all human beings and cannot be lost (ontological dignity); in other senses, it could be deeply compromised, either by one's own actions (moral dignity), by the doings of others or unfortunate circumstances (social and existential dignity).[16] As Todd Salzmann states: "The epistemological and methodological interrelationship between ontological dignity and the three other dignities, moral,

[15] According to Marciano Vidal, one of the purposes of this systematization of Francis's teaching was dispelling "doubts" and "misinterpretations": "A look at *Dignitas Infinita* from Moral Theology," *Vida Nueva Digital*, April 12, 2024, www.vidanuevadigital.com/tribuna/una-mirada-a-dignidad-infinita-desde-la-*teologia*-moral-marciano-vidal/. *Dignitas Infinita* may be considered a positive and constructive response to those difficulties after the harsh reaction to *Gaudete et Exsultate*, chapter 2.

[16] In the evaluation of this complex notion of human dignity, I don't fully agree with the idea that human dignity should be unconditional in an unqualified sense, as proposed by Brady, "*Dignitas Infinita*."

social, and existential (MSE), are central in defining human dignity and the doctrines derived from that definition."[17]

Veritatis Splendor also grounds its teaching on intrinsically evil acts in human dignity (nos. 41, 80, 100), and "fundamental human rights" (nos. 27, 98). However, in this encyclical, human dignity and rights are bound to a particular interpretation of natural law, which has been much debated. As mentioned above, according to *Veritatis Splendor*, absolute norms derived from human nature and considered as already known must be applied in a deductive way regardless of the particular circumstances, significantly restricting the room for personal discernment.[18]

Even *within* the Thomist tradition of natural law, a more nuanced approach is possible. As Eberhard Schockenhoff states, there are gradations of practical reason with their increasing latitude and diminishing degree of certainty. Following this "law of diminishing certainty," natural law should no longer be understood as a fixed system of individual normative affirmations, but rather "a system of supreme coordinates which is articulated into a concrete ethos by the practical reason, bearing in mind the historical and contingent existential situations of the human person."[19] This does not imply that the existence of intrinsically evil acts should be excluded: "A mode of conduct must always be considered as intrinsically evil and incompatible with the personal dignity of another human being, when it attacks the irreducible minimum conditions for his human existence, which must

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[17] Todd A. Salzmann and Michael G. Lawler, "*Dignitas Infinita*. Anthropologically and Methodologically Consistent?," *Marriage, Families, and Spirituality* 30, no. 1 (2024): 143–153.

[18] For a critique of John Paul II's "Thomistic personalism," seen as a continuation of the deductivism of traditional moral teaching, which does not take sufficient account of human experience, history, and science, see Todd A. Salzmann and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), 88–92; Salzmann and Lawler, "*Amoris Laetitia*," 641–644. In defense of John Paul II's phenomenological conception of natural law, as skillfully integrating human subjectivity, personal experience, and freedom, see Janet E. Smith, "Natural Law and Personalism in *Veritatis Splendor*," in Veritatis Splendor*: American Responses*, 194–207.

[19] Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Natural Law and Human Dignity: Universal Ethics in an Historical World* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 170. Commenting approvingly on Schockenhoff's thesis, James Keenan remarks that "this more modest assertion of our understanding of nature in an historical context is shared today by most theological ethicists." According to this view, nature is "a complex and unfolding system whose finality, development, and ways of interacting are grasped only partially—though not arbitrarily—by human insight" (*A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*: *From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* [Continuum, 2010], 174–175).

be protected in order to give him the possibility of free ethical self-determination."[20]

As we have already indicated regarding *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis clearly recognizes the relevance of contingency in the application of general moral principles (nos. 300–305). This recognition, according to the same text, stresses the importance of practical discernment, which cannot be reduced to the consideration of the correspondence of an individual's actions to a general rule (no. 304). In this regard, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305, quotes a document of the International Theological Commission, which states: "Natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves *a priori* on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions."[21] In comparison with *Veritatis Splendor*, therefore, we may say that in *Amoris Laetitia* a broader conception of the interpretative role of practical reason is at work. In *Dignitas Infinita*, the expansion of the concept of human dignity allows *in principle* for this more inductive process of normative interpretation, although, as we shall see below, it is not always consistently applied in this same document.

Moreover, our comprehension of human nature is never complete. *Dignitas Infinita* stresses "the growing awareness of the centrality of human dignity" throughout history and the progressive development by the church's magisterium of "an ever-greater understanding of the meaning of human dignity, along with its demands and consequences" (no. 16). This suggests a deepening of historical consciousness, the recognition that moral doctrine and its application to contemporary ethical issues are subject to evolution.[22] For these reasons, even when in *Dignitas Infinita* the concept of "ontological" dignity occupies a central place, we should not presuppose that its content and implications are simply identical to those of "human nature" as used in *Veritatis Splendor*. The analysis of concrete examples may clarify the interplay of continuity and discontinuity between both magisterial documents.

VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY

The fourth section of *Dignitas Infinita* presents a non-comprehensive set of topics related to the different facets of human dignity that might

[20] Schockenhoff, *Natural Law*, 201–202.
[21] International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at Natural Law* (2009), no. 59, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html.
[22] See Salzman and Lawler, "*Dignitas Infinita*," 145.

be obscured in many people's consciousness. The declaration comes closer to John Paul's mindset as regards the "sexual difference," considered as "foundational" for human's dignity and identity (nos. 58–59). In other respects, however, it mainly relies on the broader notion of human dignity we have mentioned above.[23] The metaphysical core of the latter is spelled out in the universal language of human rights and duties,[24] apt to overcome the rigidities of the traditional doctrine of intrinsic evil acts without endorsing a purely teleological method exclusively concerned with consequences and evaluation of goods.[25]

Based on this approach, the declaration descends from general statements to concrete conduct, denouncing "some grave violations of human dignity" (nos. 33–62). Although the list of such "violations" is heterogeneous, most of them refer to concrete acts, considered unlawful without exception, and not simply "*ut in pluribus*," by application of the same principle, i.e., human dignity. As regards the list of condemnations, many of them are non-controversial: the travail of migrants (no. 40), human trafficking (no. 41), sexual abuse (no. 43), violence against women (no. 44), marginalization of people with disabilities (no. 53), and digital violence (no. 61). Others show a traditional bent. Some of them reaffirm the official teaching on bioethics: abortion (no. 47), euthanasia, assisted suicide (no. 51) and surrogacy, which contradicts "the dignity of the conjugal union and of human procreation" (no. 49).

The criticism of "gender theory" (no. 55) and the rejection of sex change (no. 60), based on the link between personal dignity and the dignity of the body (nos. 18–19) and its biological sex (no. 59), seems aimed at dispelling doubts about the pope's orthodoxy in these matters. The treatment of these topics constitutes an isolated instance of a deductive conception of natural law, inconsistent with the multidimensional human dignity described in the same declaration and Francis's more nuanced approach to other sexual issues (as will be shown below regarding contraception and "irregular" situations).

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[23] This ambiguity between the natural, prevalent in sexual matters, and the personal, better integrated in social matters, raises concerns about the methodological coherence of this document (Salzmann and Lawler, "*Dignitas Infinita*," 145–153).

[24] *Dignitas Infinita* mentions "right/rights" sixty-eight times, considering them to be an expression of the primacy and ontological dignity of the person, as shown authoritatively by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which mentions "dignity" five times, in strategic places: in the *Preamble* and *Article One* (*Dignitas Infinita*, no. 3). In Francis's view, this declaration has therefore programmatic importance: it is "a master plan, from which many steps have been taken, but many still need to be made" (no. 63).

[25] Schockenhoff, *Natural Law*, 202.

On the other hand, there are some hints of development. "The drama of poverty" (no. 36) is ranked in the first place, probably to indicate that absolute prohibitions, when understood as violations of human rights, are not restricted to the realm of personal ethics, but must be extended to personal responsibility regarding social issues.[26] The condemnation of "all wars" as violations of human dignity (no. 38) seems to be more restrictive than the precedent teaching regarding the traditional doctrine of "just war."[27] The text also mentions one of the most striking developments in moral doctrine of this pontificate: the teaching on death penalty.

DIGNITAS INFINITA AND DEATH PENALTY

With the reform of the *Catechism*, no. 2267, the death penalty has been arguably incorporated to the list of evil *in se* acts, as "inadmissible" without exception, being "an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."[28] Cardinal Ladaria's "Letter to the Bishops," which accompanies the rescript, invokes a change of historical circumstances to justify the pope's decision, namely, the more efficient detention systems possessed by the modern state, which make death penalty unnecessary as protection for the life of innocent people (nos. 2, 7).[29] The decisive factor is, nevertheless, "the clearer

[26] According to the presentation of Cardinal Fernández, the pope himself asked, when approving the second corrected version, "that the document highlight topics closely connected to the theme of dignity, such as poverty, the situation of migrants, violence against women, human trafficking, war, and other themes." Brady correctly points out the significance of this admission ("*Dignitas Infinita*," 7).

[27] The text quotes *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 258: "It is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war.'" In the same paragraph, this encyclical, although recognizing the right to legitimate defense, rejects its extension to preventive war, still admitted in the *Compendium* albeit under strict conditions (no. 502).

[28] In opposition to this view, attributing this evolution mainly to a change in historical conditions, see Barrett Turner, "Pope Francis and the Death Penalty: A Conditional Advance of Justice in the Law of Nations," *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 4 (2018): 1041–1050. According to Edward Feser, *Dignitas Infinita* confirms Francis's position that no circumstances can ever justify capital punishment ("Two Problems with *Dignitas Infinita*"), but it contradicts what has in fact been taught infallibly by Scripture and the Tradition of the church. See also Edward Feser and Joseph Bessette, *By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed: A Catholic Defense of Capital Punishment* (Ignatius, 2017). E. Christian Brugger, on the other hand, considers that the death penalty is intrinsically evil as an instance of intentional killing and admits the possibility of changes in the magisterium on this subject as a case of valid development of "non-irreformable moral doctrines" (*Capital Punishment and the Roman Catholic Moral Tradition*, 2nd ed. [University of Notre Dame Press, 2014], 158–163).

[29] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops Regarding the New Revision of Number 2267 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the Death Penalty," press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/02/180802b.html.

awareness of the Church for the respect due to every human life" (no. 1), as well as "the increasing understanding that the dignity of a person is not lost even after committing the most serious crimes" and "the deepened understanding of the significance of penal sanctions applied by the State" (no. 2), that is, rehabilitation and social reintegration of the criminal (no. 7), both unattainable by capital punishment. Death penalty, regardless of the means of execution, entails a "cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment" (no. 6).[30]

The papal address quoted in the last paragraph further elaborates on the lack of *humanitas* necessarily implied in this kind of punishment, reminding of "the prior anguish to the moment of execution and the terrible waiting between the dictating of the sentence and the application of the punishment, which usually lasts many years, and, in the waiting-room of death, not rarely leads to sickness and madness." Then he adds: "In the course of history, different mechanisms of death have been defended to reduce the suffering and agony of the condemned. However, there is no humane way of killing another person." Finally, the "Letter to the Bishops" includes the pope's reference to "the defective selectivity of the criminal justice system" and the possibility of judicial error (no. 6).

Dignitas Infinita confirms this new doctrine on death penalty with its unqualified rejection ("regardless of the circumstances"), because "if I do not deny that dignity to the worst of criminals, I will not deny it to anyone" (no. 34; *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 269). Even admitting that John Paul II had pushed his reservations about capital punishment to the very limit of its absolute prohibition, it is difficult to deny that Francis's arguments quoted above, absent in the previous magisterium on the subject, contributed to this final step. As Salzmann and Lawler state: "Methodologically, the ongoing dialogue between, and integration of, ontological and MSE (i.e., moral, social, and existential) dignities have promoted a nuanced understanding of ontological dignity and promoted an organic development of doctrinal teaching on death penalty."[31]

The case of death penalty illustrates the possibilities of the declaration's methodological approach. In general terms, the list of fundamental and always-inadmissible violations against human dignity offered by *Dignitas Infinita* coincides with John Paul's absolute norms. As we said before, one of the main intentions of the declaration is precisely to stress this continuity. Nevertheless, the traditional catalog of evil *in se* acts might be confirmed, rectified, or

[30] Francis, "Letter to the President of the International Commission Against the Death Penalty," *L'Osservatore Romano*, March 20–21, 2015, 7, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150320_lettera-pena-morte.html.
[31] Salzmann and Lawler, "*Dignitas Infinita*," 147–149.

qualified according to the notion of human dignity as stated in this document. According to Bernard Brady, "Applying social dignity and existential dignity, particularly in its social form, would have offered a more constructive and developed interpretation of moral issues."[32] Nothing prevents this development from taking place in the future.

DIGNITAS INFINITA AND "PASTORAL SOLUTIONS"

The possibility of development is not restricted to doctrine. *Dignitas Infinita* should not be interpreted as Francis's renunciation of the originality of his pastoral approach, which seeks to open new paths for the faithful whose lives are in tension with official teaching, paying attention to particular and complex situations, and encouraging spiritual discernment to overcome the strictures of legalism. In light of *Dignitas Infinita,* this practical discernment must take into account not only ontological human dignity, or a generic notion of the "goods of the person," but also the concrete social and existential dimensions of that dignity, allowing for a deeper sensitivity to context and avoiding at the same time the risk of postulating "a double status of moral truth" (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 56) or a "double standard" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 300).

As explained earlier, one of the most important "pastoral solution(s)" of his pontificate admits the possibility of an access to the sacraments for couples in "irregular" situations (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305), even for those who have decided not to live "as brothers and sisters" (decision which could "endanger faithfulness," n. 329). This solution raises concerns about its consistency with previous moral doctrine as stated in *Familiaris Consortio,* no. 84 and *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 22. According to Francis, "It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation, they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations," which demand instead practical discernment, whose judgments, however, "cannot be elevated to the level of a rule" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 304).

For the same reason, the multi-dimensional notion of human dignity allows a more contextual and nuanced approach to contraception, taking into account social and existential circumstances considered merely accidental in the traditional Catholic teaching. In the moral magisterium of John Paul II, *Humanae Vitae* occupied a central place, as can be seen in his "Theology of the Body," where the incompatibility of "any act" of contraception (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 14) with the structure and meanings of the conjugal act, natural law, and

[32] Brady, "*Dignitas Infinita*," 14.

moral order established by God and the dignity of the person are pointed out insistently. Francis, on the other hand, does not characterize contraception in those terms, nor mention its intrinsically evil nature, although he adheres to *Humanae Vitae* in an explicit albeit general way, reaffirming "the intrinsic bond between conjugal love and the generation of life" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 68). His criticisms are aimed not against discrete acts but rather at "a mentality against having children and promoted by the world politics of reproductive health" (nos. 42, 82, 222).

Therefore, as is the case with capital punishment or irregular situations, further evolution in this matter is not unthinkable. For instance, in environments of social vulnerability, where promiscuity and sexual violence are frequent, the recourse to contraception might be, for women whose needs and wishes are ignored, an act of sexual responsibility rather than a violation of their own dignity. In the same way, the interpretation of official teaching in the context of the fight against sexually transmitted diseases could be revisited.[33]

Moving forward along this path, Francis's magisterium could achieve a more coherent moral vision, which reconciles the recognition of a wider room for discernment of the relevant aspects of each context and situation with a clearer indication of the limits that must not be transgressed under any circumstances.

CONCLUSION

When comparing the magisterium of Francis with that of John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*, it is evident that they confront two different concerns. The latter faces the moral crisis provoked by the relativization of the commandments, which makes it necessary to reaffirm the existence of intrinsically evil acts. For Francis, on the other hand, the main challenge lies in the absolutization of the commandments and the danger of applying them without considering the specificity of the different situations together with the limits and difficulties of those who face them.

The unresolved tension between both approaches has reignited, almost from the very beginning of the current papacy, the controversy over the doctrine of moral absolutes. So far, the pope has decided not to address it directly, perhaps with the aim of avoiding endless

[33] For an antecedent, see Jacques Suaudeau, "Prophylactics or Family Values? Stopping the Spread of HIV/AIDS," *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition, April 19, 2000; Jon D. Fuller and James F. Keenan, "Tolerant Signals: The Vatican's New Insights on Condoms for H.I.V. Prevention," *America*, September 23, 2000, www.americamagazine.org/issue/381/article/tolerant-signals. Monsignor Jacques Suaudeau was at that time a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family.

conflicts which could become an obstacle for a more attentive pastoral care devoted to "accompanying, discerning, and integrating frailty" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 291).

Veritatis Splendor, an encyclical in many ways admirable, sought to restore a reasonable level of certainty and clarity for the Christian moral life, but at the risk of falling into a certain methodological rigidity and unduly narrowing the scope of personal discernment. *Gaudete et Exsultate* compensates for this difficulty by recognizing the exercise of spiritual discernment as an essential part of the Christian life and its call to holiness; yet it may underestimate the need for every Christian to be guided not only by inspiring exhortations, but also by clear and reliable criteria.

However, these contrasts do not preclude the *possibility* of a complementarity of perspectives in the face of the opposing dangers of rigorism and relativism. *Veritatis Splendor* does not simply identify holiness with obedience to the commandments; it is centered on the call of Jesus Christ to perfection. For its part, *Gaudete et Exsultate* develops this last dimension in dialogue with the difficulties and concerns of every believer, but without implying a relativization of the Law of God.

By pointing out "certain grave violations of human dignity" illicit "beyond all circumstances" (no. 34), the declaration *Dignitas Infinita* clearly shows that the idea of moral absolutes will continue to be valid, albeit in a way that allows a more holistic, historically conscious, and inductive approach, opening new possibilities for an organic and coherent development of Catholic moral teaching and practice.[34]

The unilateral insistence either on doctrinal guidance which ignores the complexity of reality or on "pastoral solutions" which leave the current official teaching unaffected, will never be enough. To address these shortcomings, it is necessary to further explore the relationship between doctrine and pastoral care. Pastoral care is not a mere deduction of doctrine, nor is doctrine a mere *a posteriori* expression of pastoral praxis. Nor are they separate and parallel levels, reflecting a "double truth." Rather, doctrine and pastoral care must be linked in a hermeneutical circle that prevents doctrine from becoming a "closed system" far removed from life, and pastoral care from degenerating into a pragmatism in which human weakness supplants holiness as the supreme ethical criterion. M

[34] Consequently, none of the above suggests that the moral teaching of Francis constitutes a radical departure from the preceding magisterium. It is rather "a combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels" evaluated in the light of what Benedict XVI called "the hermeneutics of reform" ("Address to the Roman Curia," December 22, 2005).

Gustavo Irrazábal is an Argentinian lawyer, Catholic priest, and theologian. After earning a law degree in 1984, he was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires in 1991. He obtained a doctorate in moral theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 1999. He serves as a professor of moral theology, specializing in fundamental ethics, Catholic social teaching, and social ethics, at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Argentina (UCA).