

Veritatis Splendor Three Decades On: Shared Principles and Hidden Conflicts

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Abstract: *Veritatis Splendor* marked a pivotal moment in contemporary moral theology and its teaching addresses many topics that remain at the center of current theological debates. The encyclical invites scholars to continue its work by extending, integrating, and pursuing new questions with it. Thus, two years after the thirtieth anniversary of its publication, the time is ripe for a theological appraisal of and engagement with the legacy of *Veritatis Splendor* that seeks to bring its biblical, dogmatic, and pastoral claims into conversation with contemporary moral theology and the challenges it strives to address. Such a project is especially urgent in light of the request to moral theologians advanced by Francis and the Synod of Bishops to reflect more on the relationship between love and truth, on the one hand, and pastoral care and doctrine, on the other. Furthermore, the question of how to think about the relationship between the magisterium of John Paul II and Francis has been at the center of scholarly and popular debates for quite some time. Addressing these two crucial issues and many others necessitates that we come to terms with the legacy of *Veritatis Splendor* and its doctrinal commitments. The current special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* makes a valuable contribution to this task by including essays that closely engage with John Paul II's moral theology from various standpoints. Thus, we hope it might help moral theologians identify elements of consensus, name the remaining tensions, and engage in productive disagreements that help the church move forward in its attempt to give a loving witness to the light of truth amidst contemporary challenges.

THE PUBLICATION OF THE ENCYCLICAL LETTER *VERITATIS Splendor* on August 6, 1993, marked a pivotal moment in moral theology. The encyclical combined a thoroughly Christocentric and scriptural approach to ethics, a deeply personalist perspective, and the reaffirmation of the centrality of natural law and universal unchanging moral norms for human flourishing. *Veritatis Splendor* also reflected on the interconnections between freedom and law, conscience and truth, and grace and moral

actions. At the same time, the encyclical spurred intense debates among moral theologians and caused some seemingly intractable disagreements to emerge.¹

Clearly, *Veritatis Splendor* addresses many topics moral theologians continue to reflect on, and it simultaneously invites contemporary scholars to continue its work by extending, integrating, and pursuing new questions with it.² Two years after the thirtieth anniversary of its publication, the time is ripe for a theological appraisal of and engagement with the legacy of *Veritatis Splendor* that seeks to bring its biblical, dogmatic, and pastoral claims into conversation with contemporary moral theology and the challenges it strives to address. Such a project is especially urgent in light of the request to moral theologians advanced by Francis and the Synod of Bishops to reflect more on the relationship between love and truth, on the one hand, and

¹ For a very thorough bibliography of the theological engagements with *Veritatis Splendor* see Michael Dauphinais, “The Splendor and Gift of the Christian Moral Life: *Veritatis Splendor* at Twenty-Five,” *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 4 (2018): 1303–1312. Some examples include: John Wilkins, ed., *Considering Veritatis Splendor* (Pilgrim, 1994); Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe, eds., *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses* (Sheed & Ward, 1995); Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, eds., *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology No. 10* (Paulist, 1998); J. A. DiNoia and Romanus Cessario, eds., *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Scepter, 1999); Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2002); Charles E. Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* (Georgetown University Press, 2005); Christopher Kaczor, *Proportionalism and the Natural Law Tradition* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2010); Janet E. Smith, *Self-Gift: Essays on Humanae Vitae and the Thought of John Paul II* (Emmaus Academic, 2018); Nenad Polgar and Joseph A. Selling, *The Concept of Intrinsic Evil and Catholic Theological Ethics* (Lexington, 2023); David S. Crawford, ed., *The Body as Anticipatory Sign: Commemorating the Anniversaries of Humanae Vitae and Veritatis Splendor* (Humanum Academic, 2025).

² Examples of the ongoing scholarly debate on the themes at the center of John Paul II’s encyclical abound. Just as an illustration, we can point readers to a few recent publications: Beth Zagrobelny Lofgren, *Intersexual Persons and Theology of the Body: A Limit Case for John Paul II’s Theological Anthropology* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2025); Ryan Connors, *Rethinking Cooperation with Evil: A Virtue-Based Approach* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2024); Angela McKay Knobel, *Aquinas and the Infused Moral Virtues* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024); Cristina L. H. Traina, *Finitude, Feminism, and Flourishing: On Being Mortal Like Everyone Else* (Paulist, 2024); William C. Mattison III, *Growing in Virtue: Aquinas on Habit* (Georgetown University Press, 2023); Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Christian Account* (Georgetown University Press 2022); D. C. Schindler, *Retrieving Freedom: The Christian Appropriation of Classical Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2022); Ryan J. Brady, *Conforming to Right Reason: On the Ends of the Moral Virtues and the Roles of Prudence and Synderesis* (Emmaus Academic, 2022).

pastoral care and doctrine, on the other.³ Furthermore, the question of how to think about the relationship between the magisterium of John Paul II and Francis has been at the center of scholarly and popular debates for quite some time. Addressing these two crucial issues and many others necessitates that we come to terms with the legacy of *Veritatis Splendor* and its doctrinal commitments.⁴ The current special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* makes a valuable contribution to this task by including essays that closely engage with John Paul II's moral theology from various standpoints. Thus, we hope it might help moral theologians identify elements of consensus, name the remaining tensions, and engage in productive disagreements that help the church move forward in its attempt to give a loving witness to the light of truth amidst contemporary challenges.⁵ Furthermore, we think that such a path is the synodal work to which Pope Francis has called us, in the context of our field.

NAMING CONSENSUS: *VERITATIS SPLENDOR*'S LEGACY OF SHARED PRINCIPLES IN MORAL THEOLOGY

It seems fitting to begin considering *Veritatis Splendor*'s enduring legacy by naming the shared principles in moral theology the

³ To pursue such reflection, Francis set up a study group of international experts tasked with devising a framework for "shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues" (General Secretariat of the Synod, "Study Groups for Questions Raised in the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to Be Explored in Collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia," March 14, 2024).

⁴ For some examples of the critical appraisal of the relationship between the moral theology of John Paul II and the emphases of Francis's pontificate, see Robert L. Fastiggi and Matthew Levering, eds., *Humanae Vitae and Catholic Sexual Morality: A Response to the Pontifical Academy for Life's Etica teologica della vita* (Sapientia, 2024); Conor M. Kelly and Kristin E. Heyer, eds., *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis: Expanding the US Reception of the First Jesuit Pope* (Georgetown University Press, 2024); Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Pope Francis and the Transformation of Health Care Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 2022); Pedro Gabriel, *The Orthodoxy of Amoris Laetitia* (Wipf and Stock, 2021); Walter Kasper, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia: Finding Common Ground* (Paulist, 2019); Matthew Levering, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context* (Ignatius, 2019); Stephen Walford, *Pope Francis, the Family, and Divorce: In Defense of Truth and Mercy* (Paulist, 2018); José Granados, Stephan Kampowski, and Juan José Pérez-Soba, *Accompanying, Discerning, Integrating: A Handbook for the Pastoral Care of the Family According to Amoris Laetitia* (Emmaus Road, 2017).

⁵ We understand such an undertaking as an embodiment of the synodal path the ordinary magisterium is encouraging all members of the church, theologians included, to take, namely, to search "for the widest possible consensus which will emerge when our hearts burn within us (cf. Luke 24:32), without hiding conflicts or searching for the lowest common denominator" (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, no. 84).

encyclical identifies and recommends as the starting point for further analysis and deliberation. We argue that such foundational claims spelled out in the document's first chapter reflect a synthesis of the Catholic moral tradition broadly understood and, as such, constitute a point of consensus among most moral theologians working today, no matter their particular commitments. For example, as professors of moral theology at Catholic institutions, we often teach classes in which we draw resources from various moral theology textbooks. Despite the stark difference in their authors' theological perspectives, the common themes and principles we identify below are present in all of them in one form or another.⁶ Thus, notwithstanding the abundance of disagreements among moral theologians, there still appears to be some shared but often unstated consensus that may allow us to take a step toward overcoming the field's increasing siloing and polarization. Granted that the overall agreement is limited to the most general articulation of such principles, we find it nonetheless important to highlight them. At the very least, going through this exercise can invite others to disagree with us regarding the common ground we have identified and encourage different scholars to spell out how they would describe the implications of the broad principles we identify.

First, Christian morality is the response to the human longing for happiness. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). John Paul II chose this question to frame the rest of *Veritatis Splendor* to point us to the aspiration present in the heart of every human being (no. 7). The question about what gives life meaning, purpose, certainty, and worth is essential and unavoidable for every person (no. 8). It is so fundamental that we all answer it, at least implicitly. As *Veritatis Splendor* reminds us, in fact, to ask about the good and happiness is to ask a religious question (no. 9). It is to find oneself oriented towards the reality of God, who alone is

⁶ For examples that would substantiate our claims, see Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024); James F. Keenan, *The Moral Life: Lectures at the Martin Marty Center* (Georgetown University Press, 2023); David Matzko McCarthy and James M. Donohue, *Moral Vision: Seeing the World with Love and Justice* (Eerdmans, 2018); David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught, eds., *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective* (Eerdmans, 2007); John Rziha, *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2017); Joseph A. Selling, *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Cataldo Zuccaro, *Fundamental Moral Theology* (Urbaniana University Press, 2015); Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2013); Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Virtue and Theological Ethics: Toward a Renewed Ethical Method* (Georgetown University Press, 2012); William C. Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Brazos, 2008).

goodness, the fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness. In light of this, one of moral theology's essential tasks is to show that Christ is the only response fully capable of satisfying the human heart's desire (no. 7). In fact, the very attractiveness of Jesus clarifies and prompts the authentic human question regarding life's destiny. As the passage from *Gaudium et Spes* John Paul II often quoted teaches us, it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of what it means to be a human being. To find ourselves, we need to find Jesus (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22).

Second and related, Christian morality is rooted in the encounter with Christ. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (Mark 10:21): Christian morality is a response prompted by the loving and merciful gaze that has touched our lives (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 10). We are Christians, Benedict XVI reminded us, not because of our lofty ideas, but because of an encounter with a presence that gives life new horizon and meaning (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1). It is because of the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for human beings that we find our lives transformed and called to a new mode of existence. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Third, Christian morality is built upon the primacy of grace. Given that it depends primarily on a spontaneous act of God, Christian morality is not the titanic effort to be righteous the individual engages in by himself or herself. Morality is a gift from God; to be good is to belong to God, obey God, and walk with God (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 11). "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (John 6:60) asked the disciples to Jesus, a question we often ask when confronted by the radical demands of the Gospel. Who can? Only the one who has discovered that Christ will accompany and abide in him or her, that Christ is the love of one's life, and that in him we find the satisfaction of everything we desire. Such a discovery that completely transforms our lives is an effect of grace, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us. It is Christ himself who enters into our hearts through the Holy Spirit and transforms us from within. Through the sacrament of Baptism and the Eucharist, we receive new life: "We have become not only Christians, but Christ," John Paul II beautifully says, quoting from Saint Augustine (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 21).

Fourth, Christian morality is following Christ. Jesus himself takes the initiative and calls people to follow him. Thus, Christian morality is not only a matter of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, partaking of his life and destiny, and sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the

Father (no. 19). Accordingly, Jesus's way of acting, his words, deeds, and precepts constitute the moral rule of the Christian life (no. 20). "I give you a new commandment: . . . as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). Obviously, we immediately feel the utter disproportion between our ability and the call to discipleship because imitating and living out Christ's love is impossible for human beings by their strength alone. Yet "for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Fifth, Christian morality is grounded in creation and revelation. God's first gratuitous gift in our lives is that we exist. We do not give life to ourselves. Instead, we are creatures, which means that every day, at every moment, the Lord renews his initiative by giving us the gift of existence. Not only does God create us and constantly keep us in existence, but God makes us in such a way that we are drawn towards, ordered to, our final end, complete happiness, that is, God himself. The created order and finality we find in ourselves is the natural law, a light infused in us by God to direct our lives (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 12). God did not leave us alone, though, having to discover and abide by such a light by ourselves, but took a second, even more decisive initiative instead. God reached out to us by revealing himself and manifesting his will. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The power of natural reason is not the only way we can know God and his will anymore. Instead, "Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate himself" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 6) and thus show himself in history. With the coming of Jesus, God takes his definitive initiative and gives us the New Law, an interior law that coincides with the Holy Spirit's indwelling into our hearts and that finds its most powerful written expression in the Sermon on the Mount (no. 12). In what *Veritatis Splendor* calls the *magna carta* of Christian morality, Jesus proclaims the Beatitudes, the basic attitudes and dispositions in life that will lead us to enjoy full communion with God (no. 15). They are promises, but most of all, they are a self-portrait of Christ himself; for this very reason, they are a call to discipleship and communion of life with him (no. 16). What in the natural law is simply a summons to seek truth and goodness and live by them becomes, in the New Law, a relationship of friendship with the Lord: "I do not call you servants any longer, . . . but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15).

Sixth, Christian morality is an invitation to each person's freedom. The Christian vocation is not in opposition to human freedom and not a denial or violence against it. For this reason, Jesus prefaces the radical proposal of embarking on a life entirely devoted to being a

disciple with the clause “If you wish to be perfect” (Matthew 19:21). Christ is patient, meek, and humble (Matthew 11:29) and never breaks down the doors of our hearts with violence. Christ loves us and waits for a response (*Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 17–18). We can clearly see this method of Christ at work in the Gospels. The disciples came to believe because their relationship with Jesus filled them with such wonder that they started asking themselves, “But who is this man? We know his mother; we know his father; but who is he? Where does he really come from?” (see Mark 6:2–3 and Luke 8:25). The encounter with his exceptional presence filled them with wonder and led people, aided by the Holy Spirit, to finally recognize Jesus for who he truly was, the Word incarnate, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The grace of the divine intervention that makes Christian morality possible goes hand in hand with the reality of human freedom (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 34).

Seventh, Christian morality is essentially connected to the church. The church, the Mystical Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit constituted by divine and human elements (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 8 and 17), is the place where God remains present. Through the church, Christ communicates his grace to contemporary men and women through Word, sacraments, and the community of the baptized, the holy and faithful People of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells (no. 9). God, in fact, does not save us as individuals, but as “a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness” (no. 9) so as to become “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (no. 1). It is by belonging to such a people that we allow Christ to take his initiative and communicate his grace in our lives today (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 6). In fact, just as the community of the disciples was progressively formed by listening, following, and acting with Jesus, so too do we come to be transformed by the life of the church (no. 88). There, we do not simply do certain things but are transformed from within and become a certain kind of person, namely, individuals who live out the virtues embodied by Jesus and start to shape the world according to his will: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19–20). Accordingly, by affirming Christian morality’s fundamental ecclesial dimension, we are also highlighting its structural connection with the reality of moral formation and the related themes of practices and virtues, on the one hand, and the call to mission, on the other (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 106).

VERITATIS SPLENDOR'S LEGACY TODAY: RETRIEVAL, EXTENSION, OR DEPARTURE?

Starting from naming the shared principles *Veritatis Splendor* articulates that can serve to discover the consensus necessary to allow moral theologians to engage in further investigations and debates together, reflecting on the encyclical's legacy requires us to discern to what extent we should retrieve, extend, or depart from its proposal. In this volume's essays, contributors take on that important discernment in ways we find illuminating.

The authors responded to our request to reflect on "*Veritatis Splendor* Three Decades On" by describing and assessing John Paul II's proposed moral doctrine. Thus, Catherine Moon, Michael A. Wahl, and Megan Heeder unpack and reflect on the implications of the Christocentric morality espoused in the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* and undergirding the rest of the encyclical's teachings. Matthew Kuhner considers the object of the moral act and the perspective of the acting person, while Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler focus on John Paul II's account of the natural law. Matthew P. Schneider studies the link between conscience and the objective moral order, and Conor Kelly examines the connection between freedom and truth. Finally, Nicholas Ogle, Gustavo Irrazábal, and Anthony Hollowell appraise the encyclical's claims on objective moral standards, moral absolutes, and intrinsically evil actions.

Along with the careful analysis of specific elements of *Veritatis Splendor*, the authors also explore the encyclical's impact on three interconnected issues. First, Wahl, Moon, and Ogle argue that the teachings of John Paul II remain relevant to understanding and responding to some of the unresolved debates in moral theology, the question regarding the so-called law-conscience binary, on the one hand, and the reception of the Second Vatican Council's instructions regarding moral theology, on the other. Second, there are those who mine the resources contained in John Paul II's moral proposal to extend them to new ethical problems and questions. Such a project is perfectly exemplified by Heeder, who uses aspects of *Veritatis Splendor* to address the challenge of eating disorders in the age of social media. Third, there are contributors who carefully analyze the relationship between *Veritatis Splendor* and the magisterium of Francis. On this topic, the assessment of the scholars featured in the special issue varies a great deal. There are those who emphasize the need to extend and integrate the teachings of John Paul II with those of Francis. Among them, Kuhner and Schneider stress the fundamental continuity between the two popes, Irrazábal and Kelly adopt a hermeneutic of reform that points out elements of continuity and

discontinuity at different levels,⁷ while Hollowell underscores the unresolved tensions between John Paul II's and Francis's approaches. At the same time, there are also authors, like Salzman and Lawler, who call for a more radical discontinuity and consider the overall approach of *Veritatis Splendor* surpassed by Francis's teaching.

As this simple map of its articles shows, there's a substantive diversity of perspectives concerning John Paul II's influence on moral theology represented in this special issue. As such, we have the sincere desire that it might serve as a conversation starter to help moral theologians engage one another and understand the reasons of those who hold different positions. Not only would such an interaction allow scholars to make their disagreements more precise and constructive, it would also allow us to find convergences that might help us move beyond the current dead end among moral theologians with divergent formations and outlooks.

HIDDEN CONFLICTS OR HOW TO DISAGREE MORE AND BETTER

One final element that allows us to reflect on *Veritatis Splendor* and its relationship with today's moral theological landscape is to turn to the contemporary field's unresolved tensions. This special issue's authors clarify several tensions with great precision and skill, but many underlying disputes remain hidden. Thus, we wish to conclude by attempting to make some of them explicit. It is our hope that such an exercise will encourage theologians to reframe their opposing arguments in ways that reach to their foundation, allow for a clearer statement of the principles at stake, enable the discovery of unexpected convergences, and give the church a greater chance to adjudicate or bring competing claims into a synthesis.

Of course, invisible conflicts abound, and this is not the place to try to analyze and settle all of them. Nevertheless, it needs to be done eventually if we want to move beyond some of the current impasses, as we see them. Take the disagreements regarding natural law, the authority of absolute norms, and the relationship between conscience and truth that emerge in the essays, for example. The authors assist us in identifying the terms of the debate and the issues at stake, and readers will have the opportunity to judge for themselves which

⁷ In making their claims, Irrazábal and Kelly draw upon Benedict XVI's famous address to the Roman Curia considering the competing theories about how to properly receive the Second Vatican Council. See Benedict XVI, "Address to the Roman Curia," December 22, 2005, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html. It is worth noting that Schneider appeals to that same address but without stressing the elements of reform and discontinuity as much as Irrazabal and Kelly.

perspective they find more convincing. However, the disputes about those topics are rooted in more foundational, and by and large unnamed, conflicts. Just as an illustration, think about how presuppositions regarding original sin, its effects, and the reliability of Scripture and the magisterium ground how a theologian ends up thinking about the trustworthiness of the church's moral teachings. Being mindful that such a simplification does not do justice to the complex terms and nuances of the debate that needs to be had, we can sketch two alternatives.

If human nature is fundamentally wounded by original sin in ways that darken reason and will and mar the integrity of human life with concupiscence, on the one hand, and Scripture is the inspired and infallible Word of God, on the other, then the moral teachings of revelation as received and taught by the church's magisterium serve as reliable tools for moral discernment that rescue people from the deceptions of sin. Consider a theological position whose starting point is a different account of sin and a greater emphasis on the contextually dependent character of natural law, the teachings of the church, and some of the moral absolutes contained in Scripture instead. Starting from these premises, theologians will look at moral norms with a critical eye and will give greater precedence to the person's experience and conscience as the proper locus to discern the moral path to which God calls her. Furthermore, such a position would justify the presence of ineradicable moral pluralism and moral life's ultimate indeterminacy as constitutive elements of our status as historical creatures rather than as consequences of the confusion introduced by sin.

Again, we are simplifying for the sake of exemplification, and there are certainly alternative accounts we did not mention, variations on the ones we pointed to, and perspectives that would qualify and mix elements contained in both—this third path is certainly walked by many scholars, ourselves included. Still, the illustration above shows us that, first, at the root of many disagreements among moral theologians, there are implicit conflicts regarding the reality of sin. In particular, how a theologian understands and articulates the implications of the traditional doctrine of original sin has far-reaching consequences for how the rest of the Christian moral proposal is developed. In fact, some of the debates in the field hinge on the very foundational question about whether the doctrine of original sin as it is currently articulated by the official magisterium adequately represents the reality of sin. The related issues of the darkening of reason, weakness of the will, and wound of concupiscence, on the one hand, and of the devil's existence and his role in the moral life, on the other, are all connected with these often-unnamed disputes and thus linger under the surface—not to mention the questions about the

proper theology and effects of the sacraments, the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the Eucharist in particular.

Second, contemporary moral theologians are split regarding the nature and scope of authority in the life of the church. The frequently unnamed conflicts extend to arguments regarding the very source of Christian theology, namely, revelation. On this front, foundational disagreements exist regarding the reliability of Scripture, how Scripture should be interpreted and received, the integration of different approaches to biblical interpretation, and the very doctrine of divine inspiration and the related issue of the inerrancy of Scripture. Furthermore, theologians contest the authority and scope of the Catholic tradition, in general, and the church's teaching office, in particular. Seemingly intractable and hidden disagreements exist regarding what counts as an authentic development of doctrine, the levels of authority of different magisterial pronouncements, the notion of infallibility, and the relationship between the Church's hierarchical structure, the *sensus fidei*, and people's experiences, of Christians and non-Christians alike. When we add the dissensions regarding epistemology, metaphysics, the relationship between theology and other disciplines, and the relative contribution of each to the attainment of truths regarding the moral life to the mix, we have the kind of impasse that usually characterizes conversations across theological divides of which the siloing and polarization of the field of moral theology are both a symptom and a cause.

FOR A SYNODAL RECEPTION OF *VERITATIS SPLENDOR*

Hidden conflicts such as these must be brought to the surface in explicit and systematic ways if we want to respond to some of the urgent moral questions the church faces in the contemporary situation. Accordingly, we have highlighted the shared principles articulated by *Veritatis Splendor* that can offer opportunities for dialogue while also naming the unresolved tensions that mark the essays and require further discussion and study. In this endeavor, we believe we are doing moral theology in a synodal way, just as the *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops asked us to. "Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present, He who is alive in the Spirit."⁸ Amidst the fractures,

⁸ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, no. 28.

polarizations, and siloing that mark moral theology, such synodal commitments should become the method for debates among theologians. If they do, we will become more capable of carrying out our specific service to the church, namely, to “help the People of God to develop an understanding of reality enlightened by Revelation and to develop suitable responses and the appropriate language for mission.”⁹ Such a service, in fact, requires us to increase our capacity “to listen to each other, to dialogue, to discern, and to harmonize [our] many and varied approaches and contributions.”¹⁰ Pursuing such a demanding project necessitates engaging across the divides that mark contemporary moral theology in ways that are committed, sustained, and charitable.¹¹ That, after thirty years, a special issue considering *Veritatis Splendor* might give us an occasion to begin this much needed work is a sign of the encyclical’s enduring legacy and gift to the church. **M**

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⁹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, no. 67.

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 75.

¹¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, no. 67.