



by W. H. Marshner

Superlatives are rash, but I am going to risk two: *Veritatis splendor* is the most comprehensive teaching on morality in the entire history of the Holy See, and it is the most important papal encyclical since Vatican II.

My first superlative can be proved. The second is trickier. Richard McCormick, S.J., has told the readers of *America* that he is betting on the future. History will bury this encyclical, he thinks, as it has long since buried the warnings of Pius XII against "new theology." Well, this writer is prepared to bet on the other side, and I'll match any sum Fr. McCormick is prepared to put up. I'll bet that in ten years the doctrine of John Paul II will be triumphant in the Church, and the "proportionalism" of McCormick will be well on its way to oblivion.

It won't be hard to explain my confidence, after we review the contents of this remarkable encyclical.

The Church has always taught that certain kinds of actions are intrinsically evil. Lying and adultery are examples. Because the malice in such acts is not in the

circumstances but inside the very thing you are intending when you choose to commit them, the tradition of the Church acknowledges no "exceptions" to the commandments forbidding them.

Ah, but when Paul VI taught in 1968 that the choice to contracept was also intrinsically evil, all Hell broke loose. I am not using a profanity; I am mentioning a place. The dissenters from *Humanae vitae* were suddenly in need of a THEORY. They had to make their position sound like a coherent alternative to the Church's tradition rather than an *ad hoc* dissent. Overwhelmingly, they turned to a theory which said that no specific kind of action is intrinsically evil, any kind can be sometimes right, and any commandment can admit of an exception. For there can be circumstances in which the normally forbidden action represents the lesser evil, and so there can be a proportionate reason to do it. Widely known as consequentialism or proportionalism, the theory has historical roots in British utilitarianism and in the "situation ethics" of Joseph Fletcher. Whatever you call it, in chapter 2 of *Veritatis splendor*, the Pope takes aim at precisely this theory.

As a preparation for addressing this crucial topic, the Pope takes his readers through important "prior" considerations. First he reminds them that the Commandments have not been abolished by the Gospel, and that those who think they can love God while

living as they please are disagreeing with Jesus. When the rich young man came to Jesus and asked Him what he should do to be saved, the first thing Jesus told him was to keep the Commandments (Mt 19:16-22). Only thereafter did He tell him what more Christian perfection required. Fletcher preached a "new morality" of lawless love, but in the Gospel of Jesus, "One can abide in love only by keeping the commandments" (VS, ¶ 24).

**norms of morality are
expressions of the
truth about what is
good for human beings**

Next, the Pope clears away the idea that moral "laws" conflict with human freedom unless we choose to consent to them, or that moral requirements are an "imposition" unless they represent the individual's own choice to put requirements on himself or herself. The Pope points out that the norms of morality, whether we know them by reason as natural law or by revelation as God's commandments, are not arbitrary enactments, like pieces of legislation on which we weren't consulted or didn't have the vote. Rather, the norms of morality are expressions of the *truth* about what is good for human beings (VS, ¶¶ 35-42). Contrary to what some dissenters say,

for example, it is not "biologism" to recognize that the human person has a definite bodily structure, so that "the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods," such as physical life and the integrity of the marriage act (VS, ¶ 48).

Next, the Pope heads off the misuse of conscience. Some dissenters admit whatever the Church wants to say about right and wrong, but then they add that the individual's conscience makes the final decision as to whether and how to apply what the Church says. "On this basis," the Pope sees, "an attempt is made to legitimize so-called 'pastoral' solutions contrary to the teaching of the magisterium, and to justify a 'creative' interpretation according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept" (VS, ¶ 56). Well, in fact, conscience is not a "creative" decision, the Pope insists, but a judgment that depends upon moral truths about man and his actions (cf. Rm 2:15). Some of these truths are negative precepts which have no exception.

As his final preliminary, the Pope rules out the widely-touted theory of "fundamental option," which has been used to turn mortal sin into a non-event. According to this theory, the human agent is divided into two layers, a deep layer and a surface layer. You make all your ordinary choices, good or bad, no matter how deliberate, in your surface layer, but it is only in your deep layer that you somehow determine yourself "totally" as for God or against Him. Mortal sin is thus relegated to the deep layer where, like hurricanes in Hampshire, it hardly ever happens. A person can remain "for God" deep down, while in her surface layer she is killing an innocent human being, committing adultery, and lying through her teeth. These acts are wrong, but thanks to the layer dif-

ference they are no longer mortal sins. Pope John Paul repudiates this theory as both contrary to the Scriptures and untrue to the psychological make up of the acting person. The most fundamental "option" that the Bible knows anything about is the free choice of faith — to believe God and adhere to what He says (VS, ¶¶ 66-68). As the Council of Trent taught, a person can certainly choose to commit a grave wrong without losing the faith, but not without separating himself or herself from the friendship of God.

Now the Pope is ready to take on the main theory of the dissenters, commonly called consequentialism or proportionalism, though he prefers the term teleologism. In this theory, "concrete behavior would be right or wrong according to whether or not it is capable of producing a better state of affairs for all concerned. Right conduct would be the one capable of 'maximizing' goods and 'minimizing' evils" (VS, ¶ 74). With deadly accuracy, the Pope sees where this idea must lead: an act may belong to a kind traditionally forbidden as intrinsically evil (like killing an innocent person) and yet one cannot tell whether this act, this time, would be morally evil, until one has considered the good and bad results it is likely to have. Sometimes (maybe not often) an abortion would have more good results (a better "proportion" of premoral goods over bads), and at those times the abortion would not be wrong morally. Such is the dissenters' theory.

Not everyone will find these sections (73-82) easy reading, but everyone involved in the pro-life battle should give them a try. Layfolk or clergy, Catholic or not, pro-lifers will find that the new encyclical does more than "reaffirm" what we already say; it carries the battle to the heart of the enemy camp, whether its tents are pitched inside the Church as "dissent" or outside the Church as the "new morality."