The companion article which follows by Father Benedict Ashley presents a précis of Veritatis Splendor. There it is stated that "no absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: Only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life" (VS, 120). Over the next three years, we hope to "look around us" to read the designs and the will of the Lord in the architecture of medical ethics.

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Does "The Splendor of Truth"
Shine on Bioethics?  

The new encyclical Veritatis Splendor says that "within the context of the theological debates which followed the [Second Vatican] Council, there have developed certain interpretations of Christian morality which are not consistent with sound teaching" (n.29). Its purpose is to explain why these trends are "incompatible with revealed truth" which the college of bishops under the pope has the responsibility from Christ to teach and defend. While it does not deal directly with any particular bioethical problems, it does deal with the fundamental principles needed to solve such problems. In fact the mistaken trends which it hopes to correct have arisen largely because of debates within the bioethical field, although they have much wider implications.

Some moral theologians are already denying that they have ever supported the views which the encyclical deplores. Well and good! If the shoe doesn't fit, no need to put it on! Let us look rather to the positive guidance "The Splendor of Truth" gives for the future of moral theology and hence for bioethics.

1) The Encyclical teaches that Christian ethics cannot be merely based on human reason. It must be rooted in Biblical Revelation understood in the light of the Catholic Church's Tradition, and that means above all in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, recently explained in detail in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church. Although the Bible does not speak of modern medical dilemmas, it does provide us with practical moral principles that transcend time and place. Modern biblical scholarship can help us free these principles from their inevitable historical conditioning.

2) What the Bible tells us about the nature and dignity of the human person goes far deeper than human reason can fathom, but it never contradicts sound reason and can be supplemented by modern scientific knowledge. The Gospel, therefore, enables us to understand without distortion the moral law rooted in human nature and encourages us to make good use of all the truths that philosophy and science can contribute. Hence, we must not succumb to the ethical relativism and subjectivism of popular or even learned opinions, when these contradict the universal and unchanging standards of the natural law. Moral standards are not human constructs, but must be based on human nature as God made it to be, and as it has been perfectly exemplified in Jesus Christ.

3) The Bible and the natural law both provide us with at least some concrete negative moral norms, such as those contained in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount which rule out specific kinds of behavior as ethically unacceptable in all circumstances and for any purpose however good. The encyclical does not attempt to list or to define such concrete moral norms, since that has largely been done already in the Catholic Catechism, but it does reject the widespread opinion that it is impossible to define such norms, so that the best we can do in moral decision-making is to weigh the good against the bad consequences or "pre-moral values" involved in particular actions.

4) Negative moral norms only set the limits of good moral choice. Jesus advised the rich young man to observe the commandments, but when the young man answered he had done so, Jesus then said, "If you wish to be perfect, sell all you have, give to the poor, and come follow me." Christian morality does not stop at the minimum, but is an invitation to the maximum, to Christ-like holiness, as expressed in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount.

5) Because we are all sinners and we live in a world distorted by sin, our subjective judgments about what is good and bad for ourselves and others are often profoundly skewed. Therefore, no matter how great our modern "progress," we always will need God's guidance, revealed to us by Christ and transmitted by the Holy Spirit through the teaching authority of the Church. Even when that teaching is not infaillibly guaranteed, it is a safer guide than the maxims of the world. God speaks to us through our conscience but only when it has been purified and informed by the Church's teaching.

An example from medical ethics may help us to see why our ethical thinking needs this guidance. The negative Biblical commandment "Do not murder," is revealed by God and should be obeyed in faith, even if in some cases we do not see why it is valid. Yet it is also natural law, since reason tells us that human life is of great value, and that the common good of society will be undermined if we permit human life to be violated with impunity. Thus faith confirms the natural

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law, often obscured for us by our desire for revenge, or by bad laws that devalue human life.

Yet the Bible fails to define what “murder” is, and also excepts killing in self-defense, just war, and capital punishment. Thus the Church in Its tradition has had to define “murder” more exactly and in the future may still further refine Its definition. When new questions arise, our moral understanding may develop as unchanging principles are applied to changing situations. In this development theologians can be of great assistance to the Church, yet cannot claim to be the final guide of Christian conscience, a role Christ entrusted only to the bishops under the pope.

Thus a question debated by theologians concerns what kind of care must be given dying or severely debilitated persons. The Church has long taught It to be always wrong under any circumstances and even for a good purpose, such as to relieve pain, to kill any innocent human being. But because modern medicine has found ways to prolong the lives of highly deteriorated and even dying persons by resuscitation, antibiotics, artificial respiration, hydration, and nutrition, some have argued that not to use such means violates the commandment, and is murder. Many theologians, however, have argued that in such cases to withhold or stop these procedures does not violate the commandment, if there is no direct intention to kill, but merely to omit what is of little benefit to the patient or a great burden to the patient or others. The teaching authority of the Church has confirmed this opinion, while not condemning the opinion that the benefit of life, even in an unconscious state, outweighs all but the greatest burdens.

On the other hand, there have been theologians who have tried to revise these traditional distinctions by a new methodology, commonly called “proportionalism,” which holds that it is impossible to establish any exceptionless concrete negative norms. They argue that although the Biblical commands express the value of human life, they are so conditioned by history, that today we must rely for concrete moral guidance on human reason, modern science, and the best values of our culture. Consequently, they have proposed a new “principle of proportionate reason” as the most fundamental.

According to this principle all concrete negative moral norms admit (at least in theory) of exceptions in some circumstances and for some purposes. Thus the negative norm which defines “murder” as “killing the innocent” holds only when such killing is not justified by a proportionate reason, i.e., when its good consequences or values fail to outweigh Its bad consequences or values. Thus it could be argued that aborting prior to implantation an embryo resulting from rape, should not be considered “murder” or any kind of moral wrong, if justified by a proportionate reason, namely, to save the woman victim from further suffering, a value which outweighs the disvalue of the loss of life by a fetus which is only probably, not certainly, a human person.

Veritatis Splendor rejects this recently proposed theory of moral decision, as it also rejects the relativism of those who say that moral standards are simply social constructs, because these theories are not consistent with the Church’s Tradition as to the meaning of the Biblical commandments, and because they also are not consistent with the natural law. Revelation and reason teach that the power over innocent human life belongs not to us but to the Creator.

The encyclical does not deny freedom to theologians and to the average Catholic to think seriously about these questions and perhaps to come up with new and deeper insights into the Gospel and the natural law that will assist the teaching of the Church. But it is firmly pointing out that some alleged “insights” that have been proposed since the Council and defended sometimes with plausible arguments, are in fact inconsistent with revelation and with reason, and if followed will lead us far from the path lighted by the truth of Christ.

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