THE CATHOLIC THING
COURSES

ON VERITATIS
SLENDOR

by Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J.

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ABOUT THE COURSE
In this series of lectures, we consider Veritatis splendor, Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical on moral theology. As is typical of the Catholic tradition, Veritatis splendor attempts to integrate faith and reason by using both revelation and philosophical argumentation to answer important questions about morality and the moral life.

We examine the pope’s use of the story of Christ’s encounter with the rich young man to discuss some of the basic concepts of moral theology and review his insights on four major areas of concern: freedom and law, conscience and truth, the proper way to provide a moral analysis of a deliberate human act, and the role of teleology in moral matters. Finally, we consider the pastoral dimensions of the encyclical, especially John Paul II’s reflections on holiness and martyrdom in the service of the truths about morality.

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR
Rev. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., (1953-2021) taught Philosophy at Fordham University, where he won both the Dean’s Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching and the Graduate Teacher of the Year Award. He was the editor-in-chief of International Philosophical Quarterly, and the President of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. He has produced videotaped lecture-courses on “Aristotle’s Ethics,” on “Natural Law and Human Nature,” and most recently on “Biblical Wisdom Literature” for The Teaching Company.
Lesson 1: Introduction

Study Questions

1. Catholic moral theology is committed to using philosophical reasoning and biblical revelation as genuine sources of knowledge and wisdom. Provide examples of moral insight that can be known (a) by revelation alone, (b) by reason alone, and (c) by reason or by revelation.

2. What is the difference between the dignity that every human being has (whether innocent or guilty) and the dignity that is specific to those free of grave sin or crime? What difference does this distinction make?

3. What, in general, is moral theology, and how does it differ from philosophical ethics (in its groundings, in its methods, in its conclusions)?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 2: Structure of the Encyclical

Study Questions

1. Catholic moral theology insists that revelation and philosophical reason are both genuine sources for moral wisdom and insight. Why does it insist that faith and revelation have a certain pride of place?

2. Progress in understanding important matters (including questions of moral theology) often depends on making careful distinctions and in distinguishing the different meanings that are sometimes assigned to the same term. How does Veritatis splendor distinguish, for instance, between the meanings assigned to “conscience” by (a) the Church’s tradition of moral theology and (b) contemporary efforts to regard conscience as a matter of personal beliefs.

3. What is “the New Evangelization” and what role does Veritatis splendor see as the role of sound moral theology in the New Evangelization?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 3: Preface (§1-§5)

Study Questions

1. What is meant by the assertion in Genesis that the human being is “made in the image and according to the likeness of God”? What significance does this assertion have for insight and wisdom in moral matters?

2. In what ways are the ethical insights of any moral theory are dependent on its understanding of the human person and of being in general? Provide some examples, especially for the views of the Catholic Church as articulated in Veritatis splendor.

3. Pope John Paul II often discussed the ways in which Jesus Christ “shows man to himself.” What is it about Jesus as the Incarnate Word, the Son of God in human flesh, that has special relevance for our knowledge of the moral order?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 4: Chapter One: The Pope’s Use of the Story of the Rich Young Man

Study Questions

1. In the story of the encounter of Christ with the rich young man we find the basis for the traditional distinction between the commandments and the counsels. In what ways do the counsels (poverty, chastity, obedience) go beyond the requirements of the commandments?

2. What does this story suggest about the connection between living in accord with morality in this life and the eternal life that is to come?

3. How does John Paul II interpret the choice of the rich young man to come to Christ with his questions? What significance does he see in the passage for readers of the Gospel down through the ages?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 5: Chapter One: Christology in Moral Theology

Study Questions

1. Are the Beatitudes found at the start of the Sermon on the Mount obligatory for everyone or merely ideals suggested for those who wish to excel?

2. How does Pope John Paul II interpret the saying “With God all things are possible” that is found at Matthew 19:26?

3. In what ways does Veritatis splendor show that the interpretation that Jesus gives to the fifth, sixth, and seventh commandments exceeds a minimal understanding of their demands?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 6: Moral Theology and the Four Senses of Scripture

Study Questions

1. The typological level of meaning in the scripture takes the life of Christ to complete what is incomplete in the life of the people of Israel, to perfect what is imperfect, and to sanctify what is sinful. How does this work, for instance, in the relation between Adam as presented in Genesis and Christ the New Adam that is presented in the Gospels?

2. In which books of the Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) would one be likely to find the moral sense of scripture?

3. How does Veritatis splendor §12 exhibit a use of the typological and moral senses of scripture in its description of Christ as the New Moses?

Suggestions for further reading:

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §100-§130 (on Sacred Scripture and its proper interpretation).
- Paul M. Quay, *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), esp. chapters 5-6 on the four senses (levels of meaning) in the Scriptures.
Lesson 7: Chapter Two: Preface

Study Questions

1. Does the right to religious liberty make compelling truth-claims in matters of morality impossible? Is the Church’s claim to be able to articulate universally compelling doctrines on moral questions incompatible with respect for human dignity and for the freedom of individuals to use their own responsible judgment?

2. Granting the need for additional distinctions and precisions, one can define knowledge as justified true belief. What does each of these terms mean: belief, true belief, justified true belief? In what sense human nature and revelation provide a justification for a belief about moral matters to be regarded as a true belief and one that is justified?

3. What does Pope John Paul II mean by “the crisis of truth”? Why does he hold that it is not enough to say that one has a duty to follow one’s conscience? Why must one also add that one’s conscience must be well formed in the truths about human nature for there to be a genuine obligation to obey one’s conscience?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 8: Two Senses of Autonomy

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between the meanings of the term “autonomy” when it is used (1) to designate the right to determine what the principles of morality are and (2) to name the state of moral maturity achieved when a person has sufficient self-mastery so as to respect the God-given principles of morality?

2. In any sound presentation of the natural moral law, why is there such great stress on the ability of “reason” to discover the God-given laws of morality within human nature?

3. What special difficulties are presented by the fact that human nature as we find it in the human beings of our experience is a nature wounded by original sin (and not the “pure nature” of beings untouched by sin)? How can one compensate for the woundedness of human nature when attempting to discover the natural moral law in human nature?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 9: Objections and Replies

Study Questions

1. Does the fact that we human beings invariably live in some culture or other mean that morality is invariably something that is culturally relative? Is there any reliable way to transcend the fact that we live in one particular culture and reach a knowledge of any moral absolute?

2. Does the concept of “human nature” that is used in a sound theory of the natural moral law reduce claims about morality to claims about the biological order? What other aspects of human nature need to be considered and how do they come to be known? Does the use of a concept of human nature mistake what is morally normative for what is merely a matter of statistical normality?

3. How does Veritatis splendor interweave the biblical perspective (e.g., Jesus’s saying at Matthew 19:8, “But from the beginning it was not so...”) with a philosophical perspective on the human nature as something that is common to all human beings (e.g., claims about the universality and immutability of the natural moral law)? How does this approach respond to the charges of historicism, including the objection that we cannot know what human nature may come to be in the future?

Suggestions for further reading:


Lesson 10: Chapter Two, Section 2: Two Senses of Conscience, Its Proper Relation to Truth

Study Questions

1. What are the main notions of conscience that are criticized by *Veritatis splendor* and why does Pope John Paul II consider them inadequate?

2. What does it mean for Vatican II to call conscience “the sanctuary of man, where he is alone with God, whose voice echoes within him”? How do Socrates and Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman develop this aspect of moral conscience? What difficulties might we expect to encounter in discerning whose voice we hear? How does recourse to Scripture and the teachings of the Church help?

3. Why does Aquinas stress the role of conscience as the *judgment* that we pass on our actions (past, present, and future) in the light of standards that we do not create but receive from God in the scriptures and from the natural moral law that reason can discover within us? What difficulties might we expect to encounter in the situation of having to be judges in our own case? How can proper formation of conscience assist with these difficulties?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Lesson 11: Chapter Two, Section 3: Fundamental Choice and Specific Kinds of Behavior

Study Questions

1. What courses does the Church recommend when one finds oneself with a dubious (doubtful) conscience? What obligation does one have to obey an erroneous conscience? How should one form one’s conscience?

2. Why does Veritatis splendor hold that fundamental option theory tends to ignore or misunderstand the authentic notion of “mortal sin”? What is mortal sin? What argument does fundamental option theorists offer in support of their view? What objections does Veritatis splendor raise against this view?

3. What notion of “fundamental option” does Veritatis splendor find praiseworthy? Why does it see this notion so important for providing the motivation that we need for making wise choices in life? Why does the encyclical put so much stress on the need for determining the moral status of each specific choice of action and why does it resist the tendency within some contemporary theologians to urge that only one’s general orientation (not one’s specific acts) are moral significant?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Lesson 12: Chapter Two, Section 4: The Moral Act

Study Questions

1. Why is it never morally permissible to intend what is evil, either as a means or as an end? How does the principle of double effect deal with the problem of evil that is in no way intended?

2. What is the difference between “the intention of the agent” and “the object of the action”? Why is this difference so important in moral analysis?

3. What are the two senses of “teleology” that Pope John Paul II proposes? Why does he recommend a thorough-going appreciation for teleology in the sense of the end-directedness inherent in the human person? Why does he insist so much on the distinction between (1) including a consideration of the consequences of our actions and (2) reducing moral analysis to merely a consideration of the consequences of our actions?

Suggestions for Further Reading:


**Lesson 13: Consequentialism and Proportionalism**

**Study Questions**

1. How does one correctly identify the “object” of any human action? Does the term “object” (in regard to moral evaluation) refer primarily to some physical thing or process, or rather to the end of an action of this type, whatever the motive that the subject may have for making a deliberate decision to do the action?

2. In making a proper moral analysis of an action, why does the encyclical insist that having a good intention is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one? Can you provide some examples of your own?

3. Suppose that the action one is about to perform is a morally acceptable possibility (that is, suppose that the action in question is *not* intrinsically evil), could the action still be morally unacceptable by reason of the intention of the agent? by the circumstances in which it is being done? Can you provide some examples of these situations?

**Suggestions for further reading:**

- Paul M. Quay, S.J., “The Unity and Structure of the Human Act,” *Listening* 18 (1983): 245-59. This article provides a way to understand more deeply the position later taken by *Veritatis splendor*. 
Lesson 14: Teleology (Good & Bad), Considering Consequences

Study Questions

1. How does the following text from scripture apply to the question of intrinsic evil? “And why not do evil that good may come – as some people slanderously charge us with saying? Their condemnation is just.” (Romans 3:8, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

2. Examine the items listed as intrinsic evils in §27 of Gaudium et spes, Vatican Council II’s document on “The Church in the Modern World”). Is it clear that all of the practices mentioned satisfy the conditions to be listed as intrinsic evils? If any present difficulties, how might one argue the case for and against their designation in this way?

3. How does the following text from scripture apply to the question of whether a good intention or a particular set of circumstances may sometimes diminish the moral gravity of a certain practice even if it can never eliminate its evil character? “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the immoral [lit., the fornicators], nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals [lit., the effeminate nor the sodomites], nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers, will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6: 9-10, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

Suggestions for further reading:


Lesson 15: Chapter Three: Pastoral Considerations; Morality and the Cross of Christ

Study Questions

1. How does the following text from scripture apply to the question of the formation of one’s conscience? “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”


2. What is the relevance of the following text from scripture on the question of the relation of truth and freedom? “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

3. Why does the encyclical stress that the real power of the Church’s teachings in regard to morality resides not only in documents but primarily in looking to the Lord Jesus, especially the Crucified Christ, as the one who reveals the authentic meaning of freedom as total self-gift?

Suggestions for further reading:

Lesson 16: Martyrdom and Witness

Study Questions

1. How does Veritatis splendor suggest that the power of faith may help Christians to be in a position of being able to judge the relative progress or regress of a culture in regard to morality?

2. What does it mean when the encyclical says that faith is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent but also “a lived knowledge of Christ, a lived remembrance of the commandments, a truth to be lived out, trusting abandonment to Christ”?

3. How does the willingness of martyrs to face death give witness to the inviolability of the moral order, the holiness of God’s law, and the inviolability of the personal dignity of the human being as created in God’s image and likeness?

Suggestions for further reading:

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