

Pope asks bishops to restore truth to teaching

New encyclical attacks distortions to church's fundamental moral norms

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — In the first-ever papal encyclical on the foundations of moral theology, Pope John Paul II said many moral theories today are failing because of a "crisis of truth."

"The relationship between freedom and truth," he said, is today's "fundamental question" for moral theology.

He said real freedom comes only by living in truth — a position he described as not just an ethical principle but a Gospel message which the church is bound to uphold.

In a warning to moral theologians he said, "Dissent, in the form of carefully orchestrated protests and polemics carried on in the media, is opposed to ecclesial communion ... Opposition to the teaching of the church's pastors cannot be seen as a legitimate expression either of Christian freedom or of the diversity of the Spirit's gifts."

Six years in the making, the 179-page encyclical was released Oct. 5. It is titled "Veritatis Splendor" ("The Splendor of Truth").

In introductory comments the pope said he wrote the encyclical because today "certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine ... risk being distorted or denied" by flawed moral theories.

"It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions," he added.

"The enduring absoluteness of any moral value" is called into question, and "man is no longer convinced that only in the truth can he find salvation," the pope wrote.

Papal encyclicals of recent decades have usually been addressed to all Catholics or all people of good will.

But "Veritatis Splendor" — like the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" Pope John Paul issued last year — is addressed specifically to the world's Catholic bishops. It calls on them "to develop an intense pastoral effort" to restore truth and universal norms to their proper place in Catholic moral teaching.

Among moral theories the pope repudiates in the encyclical are any which would allow exceptions to the "negative precepts" of natural law and the commandments, such as the prohibitions against murder, stealing and adultery.

"The negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances ... Jesus himself reaffirms that these prohibitions allow no exceptions," he wrote.

He reaffirmed church teaching that certain acts are "intrinsically evil" and therefore always wrong.

In sexual ethics, arguably the most debated field of Catholic moral teaching today, Pope John Paul sharply criticized moralists who argue for exceptions to the church's prohibitions against premarital or homosexual relations or the use of artificial contraception in conjugal relations.

Their arguments stem from theories that would deny the body's place as an integral part of the human person and the moral act, he said.

In this, he said, they revive "ancient errors which have always been opposed by the church, inasmuch as they

reduce the human person to a 'spiritual' and purely formal freedom."

In comments on the social and political dimension of moral issues, he said that with the collapse of communist totalitarianism the chief danger today is "an alliance between democracy and ethical relativism, which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life."

He condemned modern ethical theories based on relativism, proportionalism or consequentialism in which, he said, subjective criteria such as "sincerity" and "authenticity" replace universal moral norms and objective truth.

Apart from its short introduction and a brief conclusion on Mary, the encyclical is divided into three main chapters:

- A review of the biblical framework for Christian moral theology.

- An analysis of areas in which church moral teaching faces major challenges today — freedom and law, conscience and truth, fundamental choice and specific behaviors, the nature of the moral act.

- A look at the place of correct moral teaching in social and political life and in other dimensions of church life.

It is in the second chapter that Pope John Paul takes certain trends in moral theology to task.

"Certain currents of modern thought ... exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values," he says.

If freedom is absolute, "one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience" with no reference to objective truth, he says. He ascribes this view to atheist and other nontranscendental theories and says they end up in individualism.

An opposite trend "radically questions the very existence of this freedom," citing findings from behavioral sciences that emphasize conditioning and other influences which limit freedom, he says.

On a parallel plane he notes that scientific research in cultures is used to argue for a "relativistic conception of morality" or "outright denial of universal human values."

"Despite their variety, these tendencies are at one in lessening or even denying the dependence of freedom on truth," he says.

The pope repudiates theories "which center upon an alleged conflict between freedom and law" and end up arguing that individuals or groups can create their own morality.

Among Christian thinkers, some "have actually posited a complete sovereignty of reason in the domain of moral norms," excluding divine authority, he says.

"In their desire, however, to keep the moral life in a Christian context," he adds, "certain moral theologians have introduced a sharp distinction contrary to Catholic doctrine between an ethical order ... and an order of salvation."

This approach "also involves the denial of a specific doctrinal competence on the part of the church and her magisterium (teaching authority) with regard to particular moral norms," he adds.

Against such theories Pope John Paul argues: "The moral law has its origin in God and always finds its



File photo
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source in him; at the same time, by virtue of natural reason, which derives from divine wisdom, it is a properly human law ... The autonomy of reason cannot mean that reason itself creates values and moral norms ... Man's genuine moral autonomy in no way means the rejection but rather the acceptance of the moral law, of God's command."

Against moralists who "frequently conceive of freedom as somehow in opposition to or in conflict with material and biological nature" the pope discusses at length "the unity of body and soul" in the human person and "the place of the human body in questions of natural law."

Attacks on the church's sexual ethics arise when moralists try to separate the body from the human person, he says: "It was, they maintain, on the basis of a naturalistic understanding of the sexual act that contraception, direct sterilization, autoeroticism, premarital sexual relations, homosexual relations and artificial insemination were condemned as morally unacceptable."

"A doctrine which dissociates the moral act from the bodily dimensions of its exercise is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and tradition," the pope comments.

Commenting on theories of a "fundamental option," the pope rejects "more radical" views that would "separate the fundamental option from concrete kinds of behavior" as if "an individual could, by virtue of a fundamental option, remain faithful to God independently of whether or not

certain of his choices and his acts are in conformity with specific moral norms or rules."

He repudiates the view that mortal sin is possible only when a fundamental option is being made, as if the only mortal sin would be "an act which engages the person in his totality."

"Mortal sin exists when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered," the pope says.

The pope also addresses the moral significance of objective good or evil and subjective intention, criticizing theories that depart from traditional teaching that an intrinsically evil act can be good in some situations or by reason of one's intention.

"The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the 'object' rationally chosen by the deliberate will," he says.

In that context, in one of the encyclical's few forays into specific moral questions, the pope reaffirms the teaching of Pope Paul VI that any act of artificial contraception in conjugal relations is intrinsically evil and "is never lawful."

Pope John Paul first hinted at his plans to issue an encyclical on the foundations of moral theology in a 1987 letter to the Redemptorists marking the 200th anniversary of the order's founder, noted moral theologian St. Alphonsus Liguori.

Rumors of the encyclical's imminent publication surfaced several times in the next six years, especially in mid-1990 when the pope was thought to be putting the final touches on it during his summer vacation.

Despite persistent rumors that the pope would use the encyclical to develop an expanded concept of papal infallibility in the field of moral pronouncements, the actual text has only two references to infallibility — both rejecting the idea that the conscience is an infallible guide.

While past papal encyclicals have addressed a variety of specific moral issues — such as Pope Paul VI's teaching on birth control in 1968 or Pope Pius XI's teaching on racism in 1937 — none has had moral theology itself as its topic.

In the encyclical itself Pope John Paul noted that he was setting a precedent. "This is the first time, in fact, that the magisterium of the church has set forth in detail the fundamental elements of this (moral) teaching," he wrote.

Key aspects of new encyclical

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Pope John Paul II's new encyclical made public Oct. 5 is:

- Titled "Veritatis Splendor" — "The Splendor of Truth."
- The first papal encyclical ever on the foundations of moral theology.
- The 10th encyclical by Pope John Paul in his 15-year papacy.
- Focused on Scripture — the commandments and discipleship of Christ — as the central framework for understanding Christian morality.
- A repudiation of modern moral theories that would relativize truth or universal norms or absolutize freedom.
- Addressed to the world's bishops as the church's chief teachers and guardians of doctrine.