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Freedom and Truth in *Veritatis Splendor* and the Meaning of Theonomy

LOIS MALCOLM

*Veritatis Splendor* is written to address a specific problem: the lack of harmony between the magisterium’s teaching and “certain theological positions, encountered in seminaries and faculties of theology.” The pope perceives a trend within the Roman Catholic Church—“the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church’s moral teachings” (VS #4-5). He hopes to correct this trend by reinforcing, among other things, the universality and permanent validity of natural law, the link between faith and morality, and the magisterium’s authority beyond intervening “only to ‘exhort consciences’ and ‘propose values’” in light of which individuals make their decisions and life choices independently (VS #4-5). But his concern with ecclesial authority is rooted in a deeper concern over the rising individualism in contemporary society. He questions whether the individual’s conscience — and its criteria of “sincerity, authenticity, and ‘being at peace with oneself’” — should be the supreme tribunal of moral judgment (VS #32). He questions the loss of an idea of universal and absolute truth, wondering whether a relativistic conception of morality can provide the very warrants needed to speak out against the violation of human rights and serious forms of social and economic justice. Can relativism ensure the values of “justice, solidarity, honesty, and openness” that are often identified with individual free-
dom (VS #98)? Thus the core issue in Veritatis Splendor is not simply the question of ecclesial authority but the more profound modern problem of “detaching human freedom” from its “essential and constitutive relationship to truth” (VS #45, my emphasis). In raising this question, the pope can be classed with a range of theologians, philosophers, social scientists, and moral theorists who question whether a moral discourse restricted to the decisions and choices of autonomous moral agents is rich enough to provide moral resources for the pressing problems of our time — human rights abuses, social and economic injustice, and so on — in the face not only of cultural pluralism but the rise of technological power.¹

Veritatis Splendor contributes to this discussion by defining true freedom as a “theonomy” that links freedom with absolute truth. In developing his understanding of freedom, the pope criticizes what he understands to be the “autonomous” thrust of “recent Roman Catholic moralists.” Much of his own proposal is developed as a specific critique of key themes in the Roman Catholic moral theology following the reforms of Vatican II — for example, its understandings of the “fundamental option,” “intrinsically evil acts,” the role of the magisterium in shaping conscience, and so on. The pope’s critics, in turn, question whether his position does not simply substitute a “heteronomous” norm for an “autonomous” one.² This issue between the pope and his critics is important theologically because it drives at what lies at the heart of a Christian understanding of “theonomy.”³


3. See Paul Tillich’s definitions of “theonomy,” “autonomy,” and “heteronomy” in Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 1:83-86, 147-50; for a
In my analysis of the encyclical, I propose that the pope is weaving together two major conceptual patterns for defining freedom: one rooted in traditional conceptions of natural law and magisterial authority, and the other rooted in the encounter of call and response, dialogue, and communion between Christ and Christian believers.\textsuperscript{4} My thesis is that the latter conception of freedom — which is ultimately rooted in Christ’s self-giving on the cross — is the more comprehensive understanding of freedom in the encyclical and that it offers an ongoing, reflexive witness against both a false autonomy and a false heteronomy.

The pope’s definition of freedom cannot be isolated to a single section or genre in the encyclical. Although the most explicit and technical definition is found in the middle section, we cannot ignore either his exegesis of Matthew 19 (in the first section) or his discussion of martyrdom (in the final section). My analysis, therefore, begins with an interpretation of his exegesis of Matthew 19. This exegesis enables us to identify the central question of this paper: whether the pope collapses a theonomous into a heteronomous conception of freedom by identifying Jesus’ absolute call to discipleship with the magisterial authority of the church. With that question in mind, I turn to an analysis of the central themes in the notion of freedom provided in the second part of the encyclical. I then compare that definition, which focuses on freedom’s relationship to natural law, with the other more personalist pattern for understanding freedom — and its overarching context within the theme of Christian martyrdom — found in the third part of the encyclical. On the basis of this comparison, I conclude that the latter understanding of freedom is more comprehensive and that it serves as an ongoing source


and norm that empowers and corrects both autonomous and heteronomous forms of freedom.

I. An Exegetical Context

The pope’s proposal for a definition of freedom cannot be divorced from the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19 since it is in his exegesis of this story that he introduces his central assumptions regarding the meaning of true freedom. By situating his discussion of freedom within the context of the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man, the pope situates it within the context of an “encounter” with Christ and the “call from God who is the origin and goal of all human life” (VS #6-7). This call to follow Jesus is “the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality” (VS #19). At the heart of Christian ethics is the call to partake in Jesus’ life and destiny, to share his free and loving obedience to the Father’s will, to “imitate” him along the path of love: in other words, to be “conformed” to Christ. Jesus’ response to the young man’s question — “What must I do?” — indicates that the Christian moral life is not simply about rules but about the “full meaning of life” — the “aspiration at the heart of every human decision, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion” (VS #7). By starting with this story, the pope situates the moral life within its theological and religious context; following Jesus touches the “very depths” of one’s being. Jesus’ answers regarding what is good and evil have to do with a “profound process” of appropriating and assimilating the whole reality of the incarnation and redemption. In his answer to the rich young man, Jesus brings the moral question — “What must I do?” — back to its religious foundations, back to the acknowledgment of the reality of God, that is, in his words, the “fullness of life,” the “final end of human activity,” indeed, “perfect happiness.” The moral life is understood to be a response to God’s gift and love for human beings. Its fulfillment only comes as a gift from God, who offers a share in the divine goodness revealed and communicated in Jesus. God alone is Good; no human effort succeeds in “fulfilling” the law. The “secret,” then, of the “educative power” in Christian morality, according to the pope, lies not in doctrinal assertions or appeals to moral vigilance but rather in “constantly looking to Jesus.”
Nonetheless, the law is not only fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It also has a pedagogic function to help sinful humans become aware of their powerlessness in the face of sin, to strip them of their presumption of self-sufficiency, to lead them to ask for and receive the life in the Spirit that can help them conquer sin. Further, this pedagogic function is intrinsically linked not only with its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, as we have already noted, but with its positive function as law. This positive function is the explicit assertion of the two main commandments within Christian faith, the commandments to love God and the neighbor. Hence these commandments not only serve a pedagogic function in helping us become aware of sin and they are not only already fulfilled in Christ— who interiorizes their demands as the living “fulfillment” of the law, fulfilling their authentic meaning, giving grace to people to share in his life, and providing them with the strength of their witness to that love in personal choices and action— but they also simply serve the function of asserting what positively needs to be done in order to be good and right. We have noted the intrinsic connections the pope makes between the fulfillment of the law in Jesus, its pedagogic function, and its positive function as law. In turn, these positive commandments to love God and neighbor are linked with both natural law and the divine law, both Old (as found in the Decalogue) and New (as, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount or the summary found in Rom. 13:8-10). In doing this, the pope makes it clear that Christian discipleship entails obedience to the injunctions found in the Decalogue that safeguard persons and protect their goods, specifically, its negative precepts that protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage, private property, truthfulness, and a person’s reputation. Finally, the pope adds yet another form of law to this list. The disciple’s encounter with Christ is mediated over time through the church, the “living tradition” of apostles, and this living tradition has, like the early apostles, been “vigilant over the right conduct of Christians” throughout its history.5

A number of observations can be made at this point. First, this

move to situate Christian ethics within the context of the call of discipleship, the "encounter" between Jesus and his disciples, has strong parallels with the attempt by mid-century theologians to situate theological ethics and theology within the context of an I-thou encounter. We might observe that this exegetical context serves as a kind of "fundamental ontology" for the pope’s ethics, situating his conception within a particular frame of reference with regard to the ultimate structure of the divine-human encounter. Instead of, say, the Neoplatonic scheme of exit and return that served as the frame for Thomas Aquinas’s ethics, a dialogical or "personalist" frame serves as the conceptual matrix for the pope’s moral theology. Further, by starting with this encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, the pope begins his moral theology with a profound sense of the intrinsic connection between morality and religion. On the one hand, religion is deeply moral; the love of God must be translated into the love of neighbor, otherwise the attempt to speak on behalf of God can become a form of heteronomous power that falsely absolutizes its own authority without correctives and checks. On the other hand, morality is deeply religious. For the Christian, empowerment for the moral life is found in Jesus Christ. Over and against a strictly autonomous ethics, the Christian moral life is essentially a participation in the divine life, the compelling "imitation" of Christ, the entering into the life of God through Jesus.

With these observations, we arrive at what is distinctive about this passage. Its central theme is that Christian morality finds its center and criterion in the person of Jesus. The rich young man may keep all the commandments, but he lacks one thing: a total commitment to the person of Jesus Christ, a commitment that entails renunciation of everything that keeps him from discipleship. This passage collapses what can be identified as the difference between justification and sanctification. On the one hand, it is about gift — the call to encounter with Christ, who is the origin and goal of human life, the source and saving power of Christian morality. On the other hand, it is also a call

to obedience, a command to live life in a certain way. If it offers a vision of life that inspires and empowers — that responds in a profound way to the aspirations of the human heart — then it also presents a mandate and an imperative.

So far we have outlined a fairly standard reading of this passage. But the pope offers an additional twist. If the usual reading — and one could argue, the passage itself — collapses gift and command in the call to discipleship, then the pope collapses two further distinctions in his reading of the passage: the absolute and unconditioned call of discipleship with the moral teaching of the church. He equates Jesus’ call, the primordial foundation of Christian morality, with the “living tradition” of the church and its interpretation of Jesus’ commands and teachings. We arrive, then, at a central tension at the heart of the pope’s interpretation of this passage: Is Jesus’ ultimate and unconditioned call to discipleship to be equated with the church’s judgments about how best to “put into practice” Jesus’ commandments and teaching in specific historical and cultural contexts (VS #25)? If so, why? If not, then how is Jesus’ call to be related to the church’s teaching?

This question is a complex one. From a subjective standpoint, it grapples with the question of how the moral agent’s response to Jesus’ call is related to concrete moral judgments and acts. From an objective standpoint, it grapples with how the very absoluteness of moral norms is related to concrete judgments made in particular circumstances. We address these questions in the rest of the essay, but before we do so, we need to outline the more technical definition of freedom that the pope proposes in the second section of the encyclical.

II. A Natural Law Understanding of Freedom

After his exegesis of Matthew 19, the pope presents a comprehensive definition of freedom in the middle section of the encyclical. Not only does he propose a rich and subtle definition of freedom, but precisely because of its comprehensiveness, this definition can also serve as a kind of miniproposal for an ethics that has theonomous freedom as its first principle or root conceptual pattern. In examining this definition, my task will not be to analyze the accuracy of the pope’s reading of existing “autonomous” positions — the positions
he argues against in presenting his own constructive proposal. Rather, I focus specifically on the content of the pope’s critique and his constructive position.

The pope’s definition of freedom in this section has three dimensions. The first dimension, which essentially deals with the nature and locus of the good, is entitled “freedom and law.” The question the pope addresses in this dimension is the fundamental question of whether the ultimate “good” of freedom is to act as one wishes for one’s own individual good (as one defines that good), or whether it is to will and act in conformity with the moral laws that inhere in human nature. The second dimension, entitled “conscience and truth,” discusses how the agent — through the guidance of conscience — arrives at the norms that are to govern actions. The question here is whether conscience ultimately forms “decisions” of the individual’s will or “judgments” that enact general laws in particular instances. The last dimension — which focuses on the practical question of who one should be and what one should do in specific circumstances — deals with the relationship between one’s “fundamental option” and specific moral acts. The question here is whether an agent’s moral identity is defined primarily by existential acts that shape the whole course of his or her life (what has been called in Roman Catholic moral theology “fundamental option”), or by judgments and actions regarding the object of particular acts, such as the fact that certain acts are “intrinsically evil.”

I begin with the pope’s discussion of “freedom and truth.” In this discussion of freedom’s ultimate good, the pope asserts the thesis of the encyclical: that freedom divorced from the fundamental truth of reality is not true freedom but arbitrary choice. He identifies a freedom divorced from truth with an “autonomous” conception of freedom that sever human freedom — the human capacity to choose and decide — from some understanding of “nature” — the inherent value of human and natural reality. He is especially critical of two forms of such an autonomous freedom, both of which locate morality solely

7. Note how these three dimensions mirror the distinctions in ethics among (1) the nature and locus of the good; (2) criteria for judgment and action; and (3) the character of the moral self. On this see James Gustafson’s first chapter in Christ and the Moral Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
in the rationality and will of the moral agent: (1) a consequentialist ethics that presupposes a separation of “fact” from “value” and treats all moral phenomena — except the will’s actual capacity for choice — as empirical phenomena to be studied by means of scientific methods; and (2) a rights-based ethics that treats all other dimensions of human and natural experience — for example, the material and biological — outside of human creativity as raw material for human agency and power. Both approaches to morality, the pope argues, lead to some form of relativism because they allow no other substance to determine the will’s choices beyond its own preferences.

In lieu of such an autonomous ethics, the pope argues for a “participated theonomy” in which human reason and will are oriented not toward their own predilections but participation in divine wisdom and providence. Of course he does not negate the reality of human reason and will; he even affirms that God has given human beings “dominion” in the world. By means of their intelligence and will, human beings do have some capacity to discover the values and laws of created things and decide best how to use or appropriate them. This capacity enables them not only to perform moral acts but to shape a moral identity and therefore strive for moral perfection. What the pope wants to stress, however, is that such autonomy does not create its own values and norms. Rather, these values and norms are contingent on divine wisdom and providence — what could also be called divine law. In the pope’s view, such an approach to morality is not simply a heteronomy, in which the reason and will blindly follow a strange law wholly external to them, but a theonomy — or more specifically a “participated theonomy” — in which human beings, by

the lights of natural reason and divine revelation, participate in their own finite way in the wisdom and providence of divine law, the divine pattern or exemplar that governs the ordering of existence.

Given this contrast between an "autonomous ethics" and a "participated theonomy," we turn to the second dimension in the pope's definition of freedom: his discussion of "conscience and truth," how he understands conscience to discern and enact the values and norms that inhere in created reality. In line with his rejection of an autonomous view of freedom's good, the pope rejects a view of conscience that emphasizes its creative character, that is, its capacity to make "decisions" as opposed to "judgments." Such an approach emphasizes concrete existential considerations rather than the application of general norms articulated at a doctrinal or abstract level. The pope rejects such a view because it stresses not the objectivity of moral norms but the "creative and responsible acceptance of personal tasks entrusted to one by God." Such a position tends to minimize the importance of objective norms for moral behavior, understanding these merely to be "general perspectives" that assist one in forming personal decisions.

What the pope offers instead is a view of conscience that highlights the way its "judgments" apply the natural law to specific circumstances, for example, the first principle of practical reason, that one must do good and avoid evil. In this, conscience is a "witness" to whether human beings are faithful or unfaithful to the law. Conscience, therefore, entails primarily a dialogue with God, the author of the law "whose voice and judgment penetrate the depth of the human soul" (VS #58). In serving as this witness, conscience manifests "conflicting thoughts" that either accuse or excuse a person. And since one's conscience can make faulty judgments, the pope calls Christians to have their consciences formed — to make them "the object of a continual conversion to what is true and to what is good" (VS #64). Such a task entails not merely having a general knowledge of God's law but having a kind of "connaturality" with the true good, a "connaturality" developed through the cultivation of the virtues, both cardinal (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage) and theological (faith, hope, and love). The function of the church's magisterium is precisely to assist Christians in the formation of such a conscience.
We have so far depicted the pope’s conception of the good, which freedom is to enact, and how one’s conscience discerns and applies that good — or that “law” — in specific circumstances. We turn now to the third dimension of his definition of freedom: how he defines the character of the moral self, the way an agent defines her identity over time by specific actions and judgments. The central issue the pope grapples with in this discussion is the relationship between a person’s “fundamental option” and the specific choices she makes in concrete circumstances. At the outset, we should be clear that the pope does not wholly reject the concept of the fundamental option. He has a place in his ethics for a “fundamental option”: those decisions which determine the course or direction of one’s life, whether, say, one defines one’s life as being for or against the Good and Truth. Indeed, he notes that the concept has deep biblical roots as the “obedience of faith,” the act of “faith working through love,” what forms the “core” of a person’s “heart,” the radical and unconditional decision demanded by the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:21).

What he criticizes in his treatment of the fundamental option is any disjunction of the way one’s character or agency is shaped and the actual moral acts one performs. Freedom, he contends, becomes “slavery” when an act of faith — an act that shapes one’s fundamental option — is separated from the specific moral acts one performs. Hence he criticizes the strict identification of one’s fundamental option with what Karl Rahner would call the “transcendental” or “pre-thematic,” an identification that would separate a “deeper” and “different” decision from the other more specific and “categorical” decisions one makes throughout the course of one’s life.9 He is also critical of any attempt to define these categorical acts merely as partial signs and symbols which never give one’s fundamental option full definitive expression.

The pope’s chief difficulty is with the development of two levels of morality, one centered on how the moral “good” and “evil” is dependent on the will and the other centered on ascriptions of “right”

and "wrong" based on a "calculation" of the "premoral" and "physical" goods and evils that result from that action. The reason the pope is critical of any separation of these levels is that it diminishes the sense to which moral acts do have an "object," an object that has a "teleological" character essentially linked with humanity's final ends. The pope is critical of any disjunctions of two types of values: (1) those pertaining to the moral order, that is, properly "moral" values such as the love of God and neighbor and justice; and (2) those pertaining to the "premoral" order such as the mental, emotional, or physical advantages or disadvantages that can accrue to the self and others in specific actions (e.g., with regard to life, death, physical integrity, or the loss of material goods).

In sum, in this section, I have traced the pope's contrast between a "theonomous" and "autonomous" conception of freedom. The pope's theonomous position is a corrective to a autonomous ethics that solely identifies ethical judgments with decisions of the will. But is his position actually theonomous (in that it truly maintains a place for human freedom in relation to God) or is it finally heteronomous (based solely on obedience to a "strange" — heteros — "law" — nomos)? This leads us to ask what role the individual plays in the pope's work. The pope himself speaks of the importance of the fundamental option, but how is this option — this decision to creatively define one's life — related to the objectivity of laws that are to define one's actions? What role does a person's unique individuality play in the pope's definition of freedom? We return, then, to the questions raised at the end of our exegetical section: How is the gift and command of Jesus' call related to the shaping of the individual self? And, if the overarching shape of one's life is linked with specific norms and mandates, then wherein lies the absoluteness of those norms, which shape the self? I address these questions by examining yet another definition of freedom offered in the encyclical.

III. A Personalist Understanding of Freedom

In the previous section I examined one of the definitions of freedom in the encyclical — what we can call a traditional "natural law" view that locates freedom's end in a moral law or ideal befitting human
I traced how the pope contrasts this definition with an "autonomous" view that locates its end within the agent herself, in her decisions about what she should be and do. The pope argues that the former definition is superior to the latter because it establishes criteria external to the self for determining how the self's freedom should be used. The autonomous view, by contrast, locates the norm for judging freedom within the agent's own capacity to exercise freedom of choice — for example, her own self-legislation (as in forms of Kantian ethics) and capacity to choose among possible good outcomes (as in forms of consequentialist ethics), or, on a popular level, in terms of such criteria as "sincerity, authenticity and 'being at peace with oneself'" (VS #32). Such individualistic forms of grounding moral norms do not, according to the pope, provide a strong enough basis for preserving the very freedom valued in democracies — for criticizing, for example, social and economic injustice, political corruption, and the violation of human rights, or for providing the kind of "radical personal and social renewal" needed to ensure "solidarity, honesty, and openness" (VS #98). The reason: they locate the norm for evaluating the human use of power (human freedom) in the actual use of that power — in the capacity to make choices and decisions. The danger in making the exercise of freedom the sole value to be preserved is this: value is not perceived to inhere in reality itself (e.g., in the intrinsic value of human beings) but in the capacity to exercise freedom (the use of power). But, if power is the only value, then what value or norm is to judge the use of power other than the very use of that power? Given this problematic, the pope attempts to ground the human good in an understanding of the "True" and the "Good" — beyond simply the exercise of power — because, in his view, only such a conception of truth and goodness external to the self can overcome "the various forms of totalitarianism" and "make way for the authentic freedom of the person" (VS #99, my emphasis).

And yet there is a difficulty with the pope's "natural law" view of freedom: it focuses on what human beings share — their knowledge of the law, the "True" and the "Good" — and not on what makes them unique and individual. Such an approach meets the requirement

10. Compare Smith, "Natural Law and Personalism in Veritatis Splendor."
11. My argument here is influenced by William Schweiker, "Power and the
of providing a norm external to the self for evaluating the self's exercise of power. Nonetheless, the pope also stresses that it is precisely one's "obedience to universal and unchanging moral norms" that leads one to "respect the uniqueness and individuality of the person" (VS #85, my emphasis). But: Why ought an individual's uniqueness to be valued when any real, actual individual is always less than perfect? What is it that confers value on the individual, who is always contingent and imperfect?\(^\text{12}\) Does the self, in all its individuality, need to be effaced in order for the individual to be morally good and true? Even in his depiction of the "natural law" view of freedom, the pope has a place for a strong sense of individuality and the human capacity to define and shape one's character and identity creatively. Even in that context, he makes reference to a person's "heart," which, in turn, is defined in terms of one's "fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God." Such "fundamental choices" are the "decisions of faith" described in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures — for example, in Israel's capacity to make covenants with God (cf. Josh. 24:14-25; Exod. 19:3-8; Mic. 6:8), the Christian's response to the call to discipleship and perfection (Matt. 19:21), and the radical and unconditional nature of the decision demanded by the reign of God (VS #66). But how is this conception of individuality — and one's capacity to change one's character creatively by deciding what one shall do or become — related to the focus on conformity to the "good" and "true," the moral law or ideal

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besitting human nature, so stressed in the pope’s “natural law” view of freedom?

To address this question, I turn to a somewhat different pattern for understanding freedom in the third section of the encyclical, what we will call the pope’s “personalist” conception of freedom. This other pattern is defined primarily in terms of the Christian’s response to Christ’s call to discipleship, even to the point of martyrdom. In my exegesis of this personalist pattern, I deal with how it depicts the relationship between (1) God as the source of the absolute moral claim on human life — as the “crucified Christ” — and (2) the moral agent who stands in relation to God — as the disciple who responds to God’s call.

There is an eloquent passage at the beginning of the third part of the encyclical that depicts the pope’s personalist conception of freedom. It begins with the observation that “rational reflection and daily experience” demonstrate both the “weakness” and the “tragedy” of human freedom. The weakness of human freedom lies in the fact that it is “real” but “limited.” This weakness is demonstrated in three ways. First, it is demonstrated in the fact that human freedom has a truly “absolute and unconditional origin.” Although human freedom is — like its origin — absolute and unconditional, this freedom itself originates from a reality other than itself; hence, it always finds itself situated within reality. For this reason, freedom always belongs to human beings as a gift. Humans are creatures who receive their freedom as a given, a gift. This is what it means to have a “creaturely image.” And it is this creaturely image that constitutes “the basis of the dignity of the person.” Second, this freedom is at once an “inalienable self-possession,” on the one hand, and an “openness to all that exists,” on the other. Further, this openness is defined more specifically in personal terms as the “passing beyond self to knowledge and love of the other.” What this means is that true freedom is not merely oriented towards one’s self in self-possession but is “ultimately directed toward communion.” This freedom “is an echo of the primordial vocation” whereby “the Creator calls human beings to the true Good,” and further, “through Christ’s revelation, to become God’s friend and to share his own divine life.” Finally, although this freedom is a given, it is “received like a seed” that must be a “cultivated responsibility.” And this leads us to the tragic dimension of freedom: that human beings face the constant temptation to sin. In a “mysterious
way,” the pope observes, we are “inclined to betray our openness to the True and the Good” and instead “choose finite, limited, and ephemeral goods.” Such betrayal can take a variety of forms: for example, setting one’s self or some other person or thing up as an absolute principle or, we might add, negating or denying the inviolable worth of created reality. Hence, there is a continual need for the ongoing conversion, imitation, and perfection of a life, the “contemplation of” and “communion with” Jesus so as to reorient one’s inclinations so that they “conform” to Jesus’ own pattern of self-giving (VS #86).

This depiction of freedom is expressed in more personalist language: it makes reference to freedom as part of the “inherent dignity” of the person, to its “openness to all that exists” and finding its culmination in “communion” and the “knowledge and love of the other” (VS #86). It is also deeply Augustinian in its focus on the tragedy of the freedom being its substitution of finite goods for the ultimate good (VS #86). We can identify two main themes in this definition of freedom. If it stresses the individual’s “inalienable self-possession,” then the goal of this self-possession is to pass “beyond self to knowledge and love of the other.” Hence, stress is placed on both (1) the uniqueness of human persons and their irreducible moral worth, on the one hand, and (2) the source and goal of that uniqueness, on the other — communion with God and others. These two norms or values — the inherent dignity of individuals and their orientation toward communion — are depicted as absolute and unconditional, that is, linked with an “openness to all that exists.” Indeed, the tragedy of sin is precisely the human failure to recognize the weakness of that freedom, which is always both “real but limited,” the fact that its source and goal is rooted not in itself, or in finite, ephemeral goods, but in God, the True and the Good.

This personalist conception of freedom is situated within the broader context of a meditation on Christian martyrdom. Such martyrdom is rooted neither in human heroism nor the constancy of good intentions, but in the crucified Christ. We might say that the crucified Christ is the nature and locus of the good of this personalist conception of freedom.13 The pope situates this conception of martyrdom in relation to the apostle Paul’s understanding of his mission:

Christ . . . sent me . . . to preach the Gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power . . . We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:17, 23-24).

The source and norm of freedom in this personalist view is the crucified Christ who reveals the authentic meaning and truth of freedom by living it fully in the total gift of himself and calling his disciples to share in this freedom as self-giving (VS #88). In the pope's words, Jesus is the "living personal summation of perfect freedom in total obedience to the will of God." His "crucified flesh reveals the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth"; in turn, "his resurrection from the dead is the supreme exaltation of the fruitfulness and saving power of a freedom lived in truth" (VS #87).

What is the significance of having the crucified and risen Christ as source of the absolute moral claim on human life? We might ask the same question of the other ways of thinking and speaking of God and God's relationship to human beings that we find in Veritatis Splendor, ways that stress the sense to which God is a personal God (for example, as Creator and Redeemer, as the one who made covenants with Israel, as one who calls believers to discipleship, or in relation to the reign of God). What we find in these ways of speaking about God, and especially in the testimony to the self-giving Christ, is not merely a depiction of an impersonal Good unconcerned with the fate of individuals — a Good that does not respond to or recognize what is other than itself — but a God who has through Christ given God's very self for human beings. Christians believe that God has not only endowed creatures with value but has, through Christ, shared our humanity in order to overcome sin, pain, death, and even demonic powers. The significance, then, of Christian belief in a personal God lies precisely in the affirmation that God, as ultimate power, has bound God's very identity to the worth of created reality, not only by endowing it with inviolable worth but by giving of Christ's very self on the cross. There is yet a further point about this Christian naming of

14. Note how the words "power" and "wisdom" are redefined by the "folly" of the cross.
God: that this very act of divine power — of Christ’s self-giving for humanity — actually defines what God’s nature, God’s character, is for us. What classical christological and trinitarian belief affirms is that Christians know who God is — what God’s character is like — based on how God has acted in creation and redemption, in the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit. What is affirmed in this Christian naming of God is that although God is the sole origin of power in the world, God is not simply an absolute power. Christians, for example, affirm that God is that reality who (as “Creator”) endows created reality with value, and (as “love”) gives of Christ’s very self to finite existence. In these affirmations, both creation and love are instances of power in which power generates value or bestows value on another. But in such acts of bestowal, power alone does not define value. Rather, what defines value is the very act of bestowing value. Hence Christian moral theology is not based on a strictly empirical account of reality or one based solely on human creativity and freedom — or even a conception of an absolute and impersonal Good or Power. Rather, what undergirds Christian morality is this very divine transformation of power whereby ultimate power binds itself to the creation and redemption of finite existence.

We turn to the anthropological corollary to this christological grounding of ethics. In the same way that Jesus’ act of self-giving for his brothers and sisters on the cross constitutes his identity as the crucified and risen Christ, so the faith — the contemplation and communion — that responds to this gift “gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment.” There is, then, an intrinsic relationship between faith and morality in this personalist conception of freedom: the “worship of God” and “contemplation of Jesus Crucified” is the “never-ending source” from which the church draws to live in freedom and love and service. Jesus’ self-giving is the “source, model, and means” for the witness — the “confession” — of his disciples. If

15. This is the core insight for identifying a relationship between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. See the classic statements on this in Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), and Karl Rahner, The Trinity (New York: Seabury, 1974).

Christ’s identity is defined by the act of self-giving, then, his very gift of self is the “grace” and “responsibility” that enables human beings to do as he did. In their “trusting abandonment to Christ,” Christian disciples are bound to the “profound love of God and our brothers and sisters” (VS #87-89).

But if charity is the believer’s supreme “witness” or testimony, this charity contains justice in itself as its unconditional element.17 In the pope’s words: “Faith also possesses a moral content” (VS #89). If love is the ultimate truth that defines the Christian life, then its very quality as charity (caritas, agape) entails that justice — the recognition of the irreducible worth and dignity of each human person — is not violated. As I noted in my introduction to this personalist definition of freedom: the very act of (1) “passing beyond self to knowledge and love of the other” entails that one also (2) respect the uniqueness and irreducible worth of the other person — and, I might add, one’s self — even in the attempt to share one’s self with that other.18 Charity requires that one give unconditioned respect to the personal dignity of each person as its condition. And such respect does not merely entail a “thin” abstract theory of the human good. Rather, it entails a concrete witness to the particular goods that constitute the inviolable dignity of humans — goods that entail the prohibition of certain acts as “inextricably evil” (as found, for example, in the Ten Commandments). It is within this context of speaking about the Christian witness to the inviolability of human worth that the pope speaks of martyrdom — of giving of one’s self in the act of witnessing to the moral order, that is, the inherent goodness and evil of particular acts (VS #90-94). In the same way that Christ has bound his existence to the inviolable worth of humanity, so we are to bind our existence,

18. A theme that would need to be examined more closely is the relationship between self and other with regard to this conception of radical self-giving. This theme is especially salient in the feminist criticisms of Veritatis Splendor. See, e.g., Kathleen Talvacchia and Mary Elizabeth Walsh, “The Splendor of Truth: A Feminist Critique,” in Veritatis Splendor: American Responses, ed. Allsopp and O’Keefe, pp. 296-310. For a discussion of the central theological issues at stake in this issue, see Kathryn Tanner, The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
even to the point of death, to give witness to the inviolable worth of others.

What I have offered in this section is a reading of the pope’s personalist understanding of freedom. This section has, in a nutshell, been an exegesis of his claim that “the Supreme Good and the moral good meet in truth — the truth of God, as creator and redeemer, is also the truth of humans who are created and redeemed by God” (VS #99). The foundation for the Christian morality in this personalist view is neither an abstract and impersonal good nor an absolute conception of power, but Jesus’ self-giving for his fellow human beings. This self-giving, in turn, is the pattern human beings are empowered to follow — the “grace” and “responsibility” of Christian discipleship (VS #87). As Christ’s identity — Christ’s exercise of freedom and power — is constituted by self-giving, so the way of discipleship is constituted by obedience to the radical and unconditioned command of the gospel, in the pope’s words, the constant “conformity” or “imitation” of the pattern of Christ’s life (VS #89). Such truth is an ongoing corrective to both a false autonomy that would set individual freedom up as an absolute and, I might note, it also serves as a corrective to a false heteronomy that would establish a false social unity as an absolute — a “communion” that did not recognize the inviolable worth of individuals. Why? Because it asserts that the primordial ground of Christian morality is not power itself as an absolute but the divine power that has bound its very identity to the creation and redemption of finite life. Hence any act of human freedom that “echoes” this “primordial vocation” must itself be an act that reflexively witnesses to the irreducible worth and inviolable dignity of human beings (as creatures), even as it gives of itself to others in charity (in love) (cf. VS #86).

IV. A Concluding Comparison

In the section on the pope’s exegesis of Matthew 19, I asked whether a tension could be discerned between the unconditional demand of the gospel, on the one hand, and the specific teachings of natural law and the church, on the other. I ask an analogous question in this section. Is there a tension between the two definitions of freedom we
have outlined? The one stresses our communion between God and human beings, a communion which presupposes the inviolable dignity and worth of each individual. The other stresses the need for obedience to an immutable and universal natural law, a law that is also commensurate with the church’s magisterial teaching; it emphasizes the way human rationality and will can discover and enact the norms and values that inhere in creation. Are these two conceptions of freedom distinct or are they the same? What is the relationship between them? My task in this final section will be to discuss the implications of the pope’s personalist conception of freedom for these two issues: (1) how the moral agent is related to concrete moral judgments and acts and (2) how the very absoluteness of moral norms is related to conscience and the concrete judgments made in particular circumstances. I conclude with related reflections on the role of an “autonomous” ethics in moral theology.

I begin with the question of how the moral agent is related to concrete moral judgments and acts. I have noted that the pope is critical of a tendency he perceives in some modern Catholic moral theology to draw too sharp a distinction between a deeper “transcendental” or “prethematic” self that makes “moral” decisions regarding good and evil (which deal with more abstract ethical notions like justice and love) and the actions one actually performs with regard to “premoral” goods regarding, say, the mental, emotional, or physical advantages or disadvantages that can accrue to the self and others in specific actions (which deal with the concrete objects of specific moral acts). But he also presents a rich understanding of the concept of “heart” in the encyclical: that it has to do precisely with the “conversion” and “perfection” of one’s life, one’s loves and actions, by “conforming” oneself to the “pattern” of Christ. Indeed, at the heart of the pope’s personalist view of freedom is the intrinsic link drawn between Christ’s crucified and risen flesh and the way of Christian discipleship. It locates freedom’s end not simply in (1) the will’s decisions nor (2) a moral law or ideal befitting human nature but in (3) an act of faith, what he calls the “heart” of a human, the fundamental decisions and choices that define her identity and character over time. This act of faith presupposes a fundamental correlation between who Christ is and who we are — that we are to contemplate and imitate Christ so that we can enter into his act of self-giving for others. Hence, although the pope is critical of an
approach to ethics that would sever one's fundamental option from specific behaviors, he does not reject the concept of fundamental option. Indeed, the very call of Christian discipleship requires a decision about the totality of one's life. But if this decision is not solely defined in terms of the "autonomous" will's decisions abstracted from concrete goods, then it is also not solely defined in terms of discrete or isolated acts of obedience to an external "heteronomous" law. Rather, it is the ongoing perfection and conversion of a life, a perfection that takes place in the actual judgments and actions that enact concrete goods or evils, goods or evils that either witness to or negate the inviolable worth of human dignity.

Now, it is precisely at this point that we are led to the role of conscience and the question of what constitutes the absoluteness of moral norms. In the pope's personalist conception of freedom, his emphasis is not simply on how conscience perceives an immutable and universal law. Rather, what conscience perceives are the concrete goods — and evils — that either respect and enhance or violate a person's worth. These goods, and their implication that some acts are intrinsically evil, are precisely what is protected by the Ten Commandments or the church's moral teaching. But, if the authorization of these teachings does not simply lie in one's own individual "authentic" resonance with them, then it also does not simply lie in inherited moral convictions. Rather, their authorization lies in the irreducible worth of the particular goods themselves. It is to this inviolable dignity that conscience gives


20. Compare Jean Porter's observation: "The implication of affirming the independent significance of the object of an action, for Aquinas, is that moral judgment must be carried out in terms of the meanings of the basic moral concepts, such as murder and legitimate execution, for example, which form the framework for moral judgment and discourse for the whole society. Our understanding of these basic notions can be refined, and we can and do change our minds, individually and collectively, about the moral quality of some kinds of actions. Yet we cannot 'get behind' the basic moral concepts to some simpler and more fundamental units of moral analysis. The wisdom and commitments to the good that are embodied in these basic notions set the fundamental terms for moral judgment, whether that wisdom and those commitments are seen as coming from the human community and natural reason alone, or we trace them ultimately, as Aquinas himself would do, to the wisdom
witness; it is precisely this irreducibility that serves as an ongoing—and, one might add, reflexive—check on both individual and corporate uses of power. Thus, even though Veritatis Splendor stresses the magisterial authority of church teaching and in places absolutizes this teaching by stressing its immutability and universality, its own witness to the irreducibility of human worth articulates a reflexive norm that provides an ongoing test and correction of the very articulations of any such norm. What conscience perceives is a standard that tests not only one’s own proclivities and preferences but the cultural forms which mediate a community’s—including the Christian community’s—norms and values. Although this standard is immutable and universal, its immutability and universality lie not in an impersonal principle nor a particular cultural articulation of that standard, but in the very inviolable worth of creaturely reality, a worth grounded in God’s own personal creative and redemptive activity.

Of course, individuals and communities need each other in the formation of conscience. On the one hand, the “living tradition” has a role to play in the shaping of the individual’s conscience. On the other hand, however, an individual may be led by conscience to question ecclesial and cultural authorities. Thus, before the emperor in Worms, Martin Luther insisted that it was not right to do something against the conscience; and even Thomas Aquinas stated that he would disobey the command of a superior to whom he had made a vow of obedience if this superior asked something against his conscience.21


21. See how Paul Tillich distinguishes the Reformation’s conception of theological freedom from the Enlightenment’s notion of freedom of conscience: “The quest for ‘freedom of conscience’ does not refer to the concrete ethical decision, but to the religious authority of the inward light that expresses itself through the individual conscience. And since the inward light could hardly be distinguished from practical reason, freedom of conscience meant, actually, the freedom to follow one’s autonomous reason, not only in ethics, but also in religion. The ‘religion of conscience’ and the consequent idea of tolerance are not a result of the Reformation, but of sectarian spiritualism and mysticism” (Morality and Beyond, p. 73).
The pope's very intent of providing a witness that can ward off in both "civil society and within the ecclesial communities themselves a headlong plunge into . . . the confusion between good and evil" entails that the unconditional and irreducible nature of these goods in themselves be maintained precisely so that they can serve as an ongoing and reflexive test and corrective to the existing values of those very civil societies and ecclesial communities (VS #93, my emphasis).

These reflections on conscience, in turn, lead us to the role of an autonomous ethics. The pope articulates an important critique of an autonomous ethic that would sever the link between freedom and nature, locating good and evil solely in the decision-making power of individuals, and thereby separating "valuing" decision-makers from the "facts" of reality. His very attempt to situate morality within the broader context of faith is an attempt to overcome the secularization of created reality, both human and nonhuman. This is an important point: the eyes of faith affirm the teleological character of such created reality, since they see all as finally participating in the divine life. Nonetheless, this point need not negate the recognition that all human beings, and not only Christians, have a capacity to learn morally. In fact, the pope himself refers to the fact that in their witness to the absoluteness of the moral good, Christians are not alone but "are supported by the moral sense present in peoples and by the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West, from which the interior and mysterious workings of God's Spirit are not absent" (VS #94).

It also need not negate the importance of being attentive to the actual empirical and prudential goods — physical, psychological, social, and spiritual — that define human existence (cf. VS #112). Indeed, these premoral goods, in all their empirical richness, are precisely the values to be transformed by the conscience's insight into their unconditioned worth or "teleological character." The very condition of communion is the recognition of the inviolable worth of created reality. The Christian norm of agape presupposes these goods as its unconditioned element. The theological task is precisely to perfect and enhance these goods. It is possible, then, to have a place in an ethics for the empirical and prudential study of human goods, without negating their teleological character. Strong theological precedent can be found for this not only in Aquinas's differentiated concept of reason (in the distinctions between nature and grace, reason
and revelation) but in the Augustinian transformation of the natural virtues or the spheres in the earthly cities in terms of the norm of love.

We return, then, to the question raised throughout the paper. Is the pope’s proposal for freedom heteronomous or theonomous? We have addressed this question by focusing on the fundamental link he draws between faith and morality. Ostensibly, this encyclical was written in order to bolster the magisterium’s power. But there is a deeper theological goal that informs this encyclical: the goal of fulfilling the church’s mission to speak out against injustice and affirm with other human beings and the other great religions the inviolability of human worth. The pope’s argument is that the modern constriction of morality to the rights and freedoms of individuals undercuts the very bases for protecting those rights since it offers no other reference point for making moral choices than the choices — the acts of power — of individuals. In articulating his own constructive proposal, however, he presents what appear to be two understandings of freedom, one that defines it as obedience to the natural law — the true and good external to the self — and another that defines it in terms of one’s communion with God and other human beings. In a comparison of the two conceptions of freedom, I have suggested that the latter offers the more encompassing framework. It locates the truth of freedom neither in the will’s choices nor simply in an impersonal conception of the true and good, but in the Christian trinitarian and christological affirmation that, in Christ, ultimate power has constituted its identity not only by endowing human beings with inviolable worth (in creation) but by giving the divine self in Christ for the sake of witnessing to their irreducible worth. It is only with reference to this source

22. I have attempted, in this argument, to work within the theological frame of reference of *Veritatis Splendor* itself and therefore have appropriated the pope’s material conception of the Christian life as a form of “perfection” and “imitation.” Nonetheless, the form of my theological argument is distinctly Lutheran in that its final norm for making theological judgments is the “crucified Christ” encountered in the Christian gospel. A classic depiction of this form of theological argument — in which the crucified and risen Christ is the theological criterion for moving beyond either legalism (a false heteronomy) or antinomianism (a false autonomy) is found in Martin Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, pp. 42-85.
and norm — which radically transforms their own exercise of freedom and power, whether as individuals or as church — that Christians can witness to moral truth in response to the pressing ethical, social, and political problems of our time.  

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