



A journal for restless minds

## FIFTY SHADES OF TRUTH

*Inconvenient moral absolutes*

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

## Fifty Shades Of Truth

*Inconvenient moral absolutes*

**W**hen is an apple not an apple? Why is an apricot not a pear or a peach, a butterfly or a hummingbird? Should that I pronounce a rabbit a squirrel would that make it so? If I choose to call my arm a leg, will I now own three upon which I should employ to walk?

Why anyone would entertain such non-sensical questions stretches reason. And yet it seems, we find ourselves pressed to the edge of a precipice, while urged to blindly trust those whose grip on reality has been well-coated with snake-oil and whose rationality is a few cards short of a full deck.

Everyday it seems, one can encounter some pseudo-erudite, self-promoting prophet loudly proclaiming reasons to

believe that that apple we just ate wasn't an apple at all but a pear-peach-bluebird-something-or-other. History is replete with silver-tongued promoters offering everything from magic elixirs to equality with God (see Genesis 3:1-5).

Unfortunately, too many of us buy into the swill placed before us without question or thought, blithely foregoing rationality for easy answers, avoiding the effort necessary to engage the mind in pursuit of advancing our knowledge and understanding.



**W**e take far too many things for granted; we accept far too much without question; we absorb far too much vacuous blather and trust far too much on print, digital and social media; we place unquestioning faith in the unsubstantiated opinions—void of fact—of self-aggrandizing figures; we spend far too much time in self-imposed isolation — we are want to convince ourselves we do this in order to

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protect our anonymity and privacy — yet in doing so, we avoid personal relationships which might possibly trigger distress, anxiety and fear.

**O**ur increasing reluctance to engage with anyone or anything outside our selves is due in part to a dwindling sense of community. Wrapped inside our selves, we fear the unknown, we are uncomfortable outside our self-created womb, we have become desensitized to communal living yet hypersensitive to any encroachment upon our “*Safe Zone*”, our self-imposed isolation. We studiously avoid new or different views and beliefs, lest our faith be shattered or shaken. We muffle our ears, close our eyes and scream “*Na na na na na na ...*” so as to suppress any threat to our “*truth*,” our “*reality*.”

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI warned us of the “*dictatorship of relativism*.” yet, apparently he was speaking to an empty room; it appears that few to none have given any serious consideration for what he had to say. We find ourselves living in a relativistic bubble, each with our own truth, our own reality, our own identity; truth, reality, identity are all relative to the individual: *my* truth, *my* reality, *my* identity.

There are no longer absolutes, only fifty shades of truth; moral absolutes have been deemed inconvenient, passé, old-fashioned, outdated and too restrictive. In a recent article<sup>1</sup> written for and published in the National Catholic Register, Rome correspondent Edward Pentin reported on a reflection on *Amoris Laetitia* by German moral theologian Gerhard Höver, a member

of the Pontifical Academy for Life, who argues that the term ‘*Intrinsically Evil*’ is “*too restricting*,” predicating his argument upon the enigmatic and thoroughly incomprehensible expression “*time is greater than space*.”

There are fundamental truths which can neither be ignored nor denied. These fundamental truths are known as principles, governing one’s personal moral behavior and serving as the foundation for one’s beliefs, behavior and attitudes toward others. Principles are clear, unambiguous, and objective; a principle is not subject to interpretation. “*Thou shall not kill*” is a moral principle; “*time is greater than space*” is gibberish, most definitely not a moral principle. Yet, Höver argues that changes in perception (what one perceives to be true rather than what is true,) “*namely, space and time*,” have an “*effect on specific theologies, such as the theological view of marriage and the family*.” Claptrap, relativistic nonsense.

By penuriously parsing selected writings of St. Bonaventure and Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Höver argues—quoting from *Amoris Laetitia* — *against* the notion that everything is “*black and white*.” Such objective thinking—that there are moral absolutes—according to the good professor, closes off the “*way of grace and of growth*.”

**H**över argues that “‘*time is greater than space*’ relates to an interplay between the eternal and temporal spheres, taking on a ‘*moral-theological significance*’ that affects the previous teaching about ‘*intrinsically evil actions*.’ It is not without reason that some have requested further clarification on this point,” he adds, referring to the

second of the five *dubia* which asked the Pope whether, after *Amoris Laetitia*, one still needs to regard as valid ‘*the existence of absolute moral norms that prohibit intrinsically evil acts and that are binding without exceptions*.’”

**A**s Pentin quite accurately points out, “*The Church currently teaches that intrinsically evil acts are always and everywhere wrong and immoral, regardless of intention or circumstances. This is because, in part, they do not bring one closer to God, and prevent the common good*.”

He then goes on to observe: “*But Höver argues that the term ‘intrinsically evil’ is too restricting as it fails to account for some ‘regularity’ within ‘irregular’ situations, ones which could be allowed if one abides by the principle that ‘time is greater than space.’ If even only one element is defective, the consequence is ‘badness’ and (in this sense) also ‘irregularity.’*”

Pentin further adds, “*A moral theologian speaking to the Register on condition of anonymity expressed astonishment that Höver was ‘digging into obscure references to Ratzinger’s doctoral dissertation on St. Bonaventure, which doesn’t discuss intrinsic evil anywhere.’*”

“*Where are the clear statements about the topic in St. John Paul II’s encyclical on the moral teaching of the Church, Veritatis Splendor?*” he asked, adding that even if Höver’s thesis were correct, which he “*could not admit, he is placing philosophy over the clear teaching of Christ, St. Paul, St. Peter and the entire moral tradition of the Church, not least Ratzinger himself who admits that intrinsic evil exists*.”

**W**hat is most alarming, as pointed out by Pentin, is that Höver's article is just the latest example of a Vatican-appointed figure raising questions about the Church's teaching on intrinsically evil acts. Other Pontifical Academy members in recent days have been echoing similar thoughts. One member, Alain Thomasset, a Jesuit priest, has gone so far as to categorically deny the existence of "intrinsic evil."

Saint Pope John Paul II recognized and acknowledged this tendency to distort the truth, to cast a shadow over the clarity of objective moral principles in shades of gray. In his encyclical, promulgated in 1993, *Veritas Splendor: The splendor of truth regarding certain fundamental questions of the church's moral teaching*, he wrote with considerable prescience and foresight:

*"Today, however, it seems necessary to reflect on the whole of the Church's moral teaching, with the precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied. In fact, a new situation has come about within the Christian community itself, which has experienced 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. 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. At the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential*

*and constitutive relationship to truth. Thus the traditional doctrine regarding the natural law, and the universality and the permanent validity of its precepts, is rejected; certain of the Church's moral teachings are found simply unacceptable; and the Magisterium itself is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to "exhort consciences" and to "propose values", in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices."*<sup>2</sup>

**Veritas Splendor** is a *tour de force*, a clear voice of reason set against a tsunami of relativistic and subjective distortions of natural law. Saint John Paul II adds, "The way in which one conceives the relationship between freedom and law is ... intimately bound up with one's understanding of the moral conscience. Here the cultural tendencies ... — in which freedom and law are set in opposition to each other and kept apart, and freedom is exalted almost to the point of idolatry — lead to a "creative" understanding of moral conscience, which diverges from the teaching of the Church's tradition and her Magisterium."<sup>3</sup>

**H**e notes how "some authors have proposed a kind of double status of moral truth. Beyond the doctrinal and abstract level, one would have to acknowledge the priority of a certain more concrete existential consideration. The latter, by taking account of circumstances and the situation, could legitimately be the basis of certain exceptions to the general rule and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual

conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept."<sup>4</sup>

**F**urther on, he writes: "Judgments about morality cannot be made without taking into consideration whether or not the deliberate choice of a specific kind of behavior is in conformity with the dignity and integral vocation of the human person. Every choice always implies a reference by the deliberate will to the goods and evils indicated by the natural law as goods to be pursued and evils to be avoided. In the case of the positive moral precepts, prudence always has the task of verifying that they apply in a specific situation, for example, in view of other duties which may be more important or urgent. **But the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behavior as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception. They do not leave room, in any morally acceptable way, for the "creativity" of any contrary determination whatsoever.** Once the moral species of an action prohibited by a universal rule is concretely recognized, the only morally good act is that of obeying the moral law and of refraining from the action which it forbids."<sup>5</sup>

What is perhaps most consequential with respect to the current obscuration of moral truths is the disordered subjective nature and the underlying fractured premise of the argument.

**T**he subjectivist argument derisively contradicts what Saint Paul admonishes: "it is not licit to do evil that good may come of it" (CF. Rom 3:8). Saint John Paul II reminds us that "One must therefore reject the thesis, ... which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil ... the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behavior or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned.

The primary and decisive element for moral judgment is the object of the human act, which establishes whether it is capable of being ordered to the good and to the ultimate end, which is God."<sup>6</sup>

**"Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature 'incapable of being ordered' to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church's moral tradition, have been termed "intrinsically evil" (intrinsic malum): they are such always and per se, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances. Consequently, without in the least denying the influence on morality exercised by circumstances and especially by intentions, the Church teaches that 'there exist acts which per se and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object.'** The Second Vatican Council itself, in discussing the respect due to the human person, gives a number of examples of such acts: "Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion,

ethanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat laborers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator.

With regard to intrinsically evil acts, and in reference to contraceptive practices whereby the conjugal act is intentionally rendered infertile, Pope Paul VI teaches: "Though it is true that sometimes it is lawful to tolerate a lesser moral evil in order to avoid a greater evil or in order to promote a greater good, it is never lawful, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil that good may come of it (cf. Rom 3:8) — in other words, to intend directly something which of its very nature contradicts the moral order, and which must therefore be judged unworthy of man, even though the intention is to protect or promote the welfare of an individual, of a family or of society in general."<sup>7</sup>

"If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it. They remain 'irremediably' evil acts; per se and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person. 'As for acts which are themselves sins (cum iam opera ipsa peccata sunt), Saint Augustine writes, like theft, fornication, blasphemy, who would

dare affirm that, by doing them for good motives (causis bonis), they would no longer be sins, or, what is even more absurd, that they would be sins that are justified?'

**Consequently, circumstances or intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act "subjectively" good or defensible as a choice."<sup>8</sup>**

**S**aint John Paul II concludes Chapter II of *Veritas Splendor* with these thoughts:

"As is evident, in the question of the morality of human acts, and in particular the question of whether there exist intrinsically evil acts, we find ourselves faced with the question of man himself, of his truth and of the moral consequences flowing from that truth. By acknowledging and teaching the existence of intrinsic evil in given human acts, the Church remains faithful to the integral truth about man; she thus respects and promotes man in his dignity and vocation. Consequently, she must reject the theories set forth above, which contradict this truth.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, we must not be content merely to warn the faithful about the errors and dangers of certain ethical theories. We must first of all show the inviting splendor of that truth which is Jesus Christ himself. In him, who is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6), man can understand fully and live perfectly, through his good actions, his vocation to freedom in obedience to the divine law summarized in the commandment of love of God and neighbor. And this is what takes place through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, of freedom and of love: in

him we are enabled to interiorize the law, to receive it and to live it as the motivating force of true personal freedom: "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (Jas 1:25).<sup>9</sup>

**S**plendor of Truth, *Veritas Splendor*, possesses a deep, profound richness of voice which, as its title suggests, rings with objective and absolute truthfulness. And as Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6), if we are Christian, as disciples of Jesus, then we should know the Truth.

Some final thoughts, from Saint John Paul's monumental encyclical:

"The Church's teaching, and in particular her firmness in defending the universal and permanent validity of the precepts prohibiting intrinsically evil acts, is not infrequently seen as the sign of an intolerable intransigence, particularly with regard to the enormously complex and conflict-filled situations present in the moral life of individuals and of society today; this intransigence is said to be in contrast with the Church's motherhood. The Church, one hears, is lacking in understanding and compassion. But the Church's motherhood can never in fact be separated from her teaching mission, which she must always carry out as the faithful Bride of Christ, who is the Truth in person. "As Teacher, she never tires of proclaiming the moral norm... **The Church is in no way the author or the arbiter of this norm.** In obedience to the truth which is Christ, whose image is reflected in the nature and dignity of the human person, the Church interprets the moral norm and proposes it to all people of good will, without concealing its demands

of radicalness and perfection".

In fact, genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good, for his authentic freedom. And this does not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God's eternal Wisdom, which we have received in Christ, and as a service to man, to the growth of his freedom and to the attainment of his happiness.

Still, a clear and forceful presentation of moral truth can never be separated from a profound and heartfelt respect, born of that patient and trusting love which man always needs along his moral journey, a journey frequently wearisome on account of difficulties, weakness and painful situations. The Church can never renounce 'the principle of truth and consistency, whereby she does not agree to call good evil and evil good'; she must always be careful not to break the bruised reed or to quench the dimly burning wick (cf. Is 42:3). As Paul VI wrote: 'While it is an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ, this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ himself showed by his conversations and dealings with men. Having come not to judge the world but to save it, he was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners.'<sup>10</sup>

"The Church's firmness in defending the universal and unchanging moral norms is not demeaning at all. Its only purpose is to serve man's true freedom. Because there can be no freedom apart from or in opposition to the truth, the categorical — unyielding and uncompromising — defense of the absolutely essential

demands of man's personal dignity must be considered the way and the condition for the very existence of freedom.

This service is directed to every man, considered in the uniqueness and singularity of his being and existence: only by obedience to universal moral norms does man find full confirmation of his personal uniqueness and the possibility of authentic moral growth. For this very reason, this service is also directed to all mankind: it is not only for individuals but also for the community, for society as such. These norms in fact represent the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy, which can come into being and develop only on the basis of the equality of all its members, who possess common rights and duties. **When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone.** It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the "poorest of the poor" on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal."<sup>11</sup>

Jesus said to those who believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). Are you free?

1. Edward Pentin, "Pontifical Academy for Life Member: Term 'Intrinsically Evil' Too Restricting", National Catholic Register, January 29, 2018.

2. Saint Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Veritas Splendor*, 1993, § 4 ¶ 2.

3. *Veritas Splendor*, § 54 ¶ 2.

4. *Veritas Splendor*, § 56 ¶ 1.

5. *Veritas Splendor*, § 67 ¶ 2.

6. *Veritas Splendor*, § 79 ¶ 1-2.

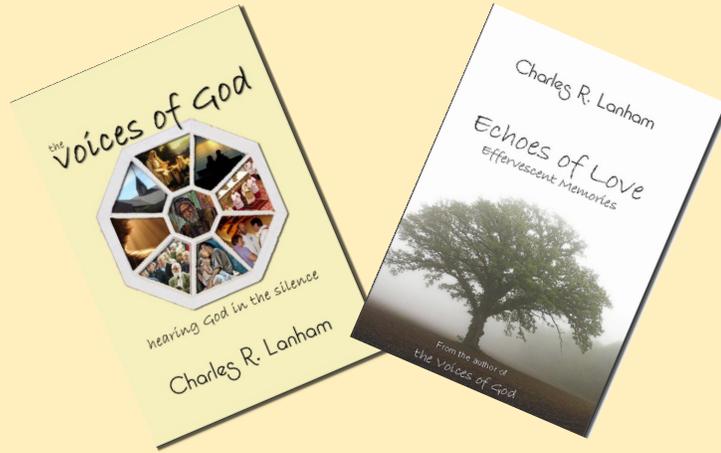
7. *Veritas Splendor*, § 80 ¶ 1-2.

8. *Veritas Splendor*, § 81 ¶ 2-3, cf. *Contra Mendacium*, VII, 18: PL 40, 528; cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, IX, q. 7, a. 2; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 1753-1755.

9. *Veritas Splendor*, § 83 ¶ 1-2.

10. *Veritas Splendor*, § 95.

11. *Veritas Splendor*, § 96.



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