

# Freedom and moral truth must go hand in hand

by Robert Royal

If you get your news about the pope from the American press, you would probably guess that *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), John Paul's encyclical on morality which appeared earlier this month is all about sex. In the media, the Vatican is almost always portrayed as obsessed with sex – and a country that has produced Madonna, “Basic Instinct,” Heidi Fleiss and homosexual bath houses has a certain familiarity with sexual obsessions. But if you read the encyclical for the juicy parts you are going to be disappointed. There are only one or two brief sentences on sex in 179 pages. John Paul is after bigger game.

The pope knows that freedom is the wave of the present and future, and he believes freedom properly understood, is at the heart of a Christian understanding of the human person. What many people in contemporary America may find scandalous in this encyclical is that John Paul believes authentic freedom can only exist when it participates in moral truth.

We are so used to the half-truth that you should make up your own mind about right and wrong that we forget figures like Adolph Hitler and Charles Manson, two notable examples of moral self-determination. Ultimately, we do all have to make our own moral choices. The pope reminds us though, that unformed consciences operating in the skeptical atmosphere of this century have often led to disaster.

Americans once understood that truth – moral truth – is the very basis of freedom. We are in crisis on many fronts because we have lost that understanding. The Founders were not ashamed to write “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” The

American Jesuit John Courtney Murray has said this affirms three things: There are truths, we can know them, and we – we Americans – hold them because they undergird our liberty as a society and our dignity as human beings.

John Paul could not agree more, and warns that those who think skepticism and relativism protect democracy will quickly find their nations not only in crisis, but in bondage. Where there is no truth as a standard, power will impose order.

As a pastor, the pope naturally has aims in this encyclical that go beyond politics. He also wants to restore another kind of freedom: the freedom of the human person from all slavery, internal as well as external. To do that, he believes, requires saying some acts are always simply wrong. John Paul was a moral theologian before he became a bishop and fully understands how complex ethical judgments may be. But he clearly wants to restate some simple truths; we already have enough complexities.

For example, we've grown used to the language of therapy in which virtually all relationships are described in terms of "co-dependency." We also talk of "recovering" from addictions to everything from alcohol and drugs to love and religion. Some of these therapies, of course, free people from slavery to habit.

But John Paul points out that psychological and sociological categories only take us so far. Even freed from irrational compulsions, we still face the old human questions: How are we to live; what is right and wrong, and what is the meaning of our existence? We become free, healthy, fully human, only when we recognize the "splendor" of deep religious and moral truths.

Recent sexual ethics worry the pope both for their own sake and for what they say about our notions of responsibility. He quotes Saint Paul: "You were called to freedom brethren, only

do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." After the sexual revolution – and the epidemic of divorce, illegitimacy, child abuse and sexually transmitted disease – a gentle reminder of some home truths about sexuality might seem welcome.

But current sexual morality is ridiculed with rationalizations. Therefore, John Paul is accused of not only sexual obsession, but of a "rigid" sexual ethic. The pope's position was, and in many cases still is, of course, also the teaching of many Protestants and Jews who try to follow Biblical norms on faith and morals.

John Paul addresses this letter specifically to Catholic bishops around the world. He believes some bishops and theologians have contributed to current moral confusion. (Dissent within all the religious groups has introduced doubts about fundamental teaching that were unquestioned until just a short time ago.) In particular, the pope warns against several modern ethical schools that look only at intentions, or the good to derive from a bad act, or the proportion of good to evil. These are sincere efforts at moral reasoning but can never justify anything that is wrong per se. Catholic institutions – colleges, hospitals, welfare agencies, even seminaries – that deny this are not Catholic, and bishops should remove the Catholic name to avoid confusion.

This request will no doubt be the most controversial part of the encyclical. We are so pluralistic that we think even Catholic institutions should not be Catholic – or bother very much about truth.

As Americans, we all profess deep respect for the rights of conscience. But if John Paul is right, we are reaping the consequences of a one-sided emphasis on an absolute self-determination that neglects truth. The pope quotes the great English convert John Henry Newman to remind us of the other half of the moral dynamic: "Conscience has rights because it

has duties."

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