REFLECTIONS ON THE EYCLYLICAL "THE SPLENDOUR OF TRUTH"

1994 **+ P J Cullinane**

> Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia 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 sub-human living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat labourers 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, the contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the creator (Second Vatican Council, GS 27, quoted by Pope John Paul II, n.80).

Can there be exceptions to moral prohibitions like these? The pope is under the impression that some Catholic theologians have been saying "yes". So he is saying ":no". And that in a nutshell, is why this Encyclical has been written.

The Pope gives other examples, from the recently issued Catechism of the Catholic Church, of the

> kinds of behaviour and actions (that are) contrary to human dignity: theft, deliberate retention of goods lent or objects lost, business fraud… unjust wages… forcing up prices by trading on the ignorance or hardship of another… the misappropriation and private use of the corporate property of an enterprise, work badly done, tax fraud, forgery of cheques and invoices, excessive expenses, waste, etc. (n.100)

The Pope then adds a very modern list of principles affecting the behaviour of politicians and governments; (n.101). (So much for assumptions that this Encyclical would be mainly about contraception.)

The Pope's purpose was not to discuss any of these particular aspects of morality. Rather, he was facing the question: can there be exceptions to prohibitions like these?

Because the Encyclical is addressed to bishops, the Pope feels entitled to take a certain amount for granted. It was six years in preparation, and some aspects of it are highly specialised. It certainly isn't easy reading.

Thumbs down?

Perhaps the most striking thing about comments published in the NZ Tablet, 12 December 1993, was that they were hardly about the Encyclical at all. They reflected a lot of other agenda.

I am not suggesting that those other agenda aren't important. On the contrary, why would people feel so strongly about a document which they describe as irrelevant to them? Why do people say they disagree with the contents or the usefulness of a

document they found difficult even to understand – even Impenetrable"? In other walks of life we try not to judge before we have understood. Why shouldn't the same standard apply?

We need to ask whence the obvious antipathy towards the Pope, especially when he teaches on morality?

The answer to these questions would help us understand why people have difficulty hearing, or even wanting to hear, what the Pope is saying. The discussion would have to include questions about credibility, structures, life-style, relationships, language, people's sense of belonging or not belonging, people being heard or not being heard, being able to participate or not being able to participate, authority, clericalism, gender discrimination, transferred anger and projection, etc. All these matters deserve attention.

In the meantime, however, some have looked at the Encyclical itself. Nicholas Lash, usually a forthright critic, acknowledges that the Encyclical has been given "slightly nervous respect… in circles not known either for their affection for the Church or for their approval of authoritarian government" (*The Tablet*, London, 13 November 1993).

There must be something very striking about this Encyclical.

Moral relativism in our Culture

The Encyclical will strike a chord with those who have reflected on the moral relativism around us. "Who can judge (what is right and wrong):, "Perhaps it's right for them", "everybody does it", "there's no harm in it", "it's my choice".

In other words, the Pope is concerned about certain "currents of thought" in Western culture which would make the difference between right and wrong depend on purely relative, subjective, and ultimately individualistic factors.

He reminds us that true morality has regard for the *meaning* of our actions. Therefore, right and wrong

- don't depend merely on the possibly consequences or results of what se do;
- can't be determined by majority preference or democratic process of statistics;
- isn't determined merely by each individual's preference or choice as if there were no need for any norm outside ourselves.

Exceptions to moral prohibitions?

Catholic theologians would be unanimous in their agreement with the Pope in rejecting moral relativism.

But the Pope has been concerned that certain moral theories recently developed within the Church, especially theories which would allow exceptions to moral prohibitions, hardly manage to avoid the flaws of relativism, subjectivism, and individualism. (*We shall return to the question of what these theologians are actually saying.)

The Pope's position is that even allowing, as we must, for the place of personal judgement and conscience, particular circumstances, and cultural differences, there is still something that is common to all human beings and is the same at all times. This is human

nature itself, or, more specifically the dignity of the human person. It is universal (cf n.53).

Feminist moral theologian, Teresa Sowle Cahill makes the same point from a different direction. She would want to ensure that claims made for universal norms do not serve gender bias. But she also realises that

> One problem that arises as a result of feminist theology's appeal to "experience" is the danger of replacing oppressive generalisations with bottomless particularity. If women's experience alone is exalted as the final moral standard, we run the danger of a feminist relativism which is ultimately unable to give any real reasons for preferring equality rather than hierarchy.
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> It is important to move back from particularity to the sense of shared human values which are so central to natural law (*The Tablet*, London, 11 December 1993).

Prohibitions of the moral law really only identify actions which are not authentically human, not true to human dignity.

Consequently, supposed exceptions to the moral law would be exceptions to the law of being truly human; exceptions to the dignity of human personhood.

That is why the Pope says human nature itself is at stake (n.83).

Because human nature and human dignity derive from God's offer of friendship, to go against human nature is to spurn God's friendship, i.e. sin.

Christ-centred morality

The Encyclical is not limited to correcting errors. The Pope is proclaiming anew our calling to full humanness and human dignity. This involves human freedom. Much of the Encyclical is about the connection between freedom and truth. Only the truth can make us truly free.

This calling to be authentically human comes into focus in our calling to be disciples of Christ. He is the way, the truth and the life. Through union with him, we become fully human, fully alive.

The Pope's presentation of Christian morality is essentially Christ-centred.

Martyrdom

The difficult circumstances which some might have considered justify exceptions to moral prohibitions, could hardly be more difficult than the choice of losing one's very life as the price of being faithful to the moral law.

Christian revelation throws a totally new light on how we come to the fullness of God's plan for human nature. Christ came to it through the Resurrection. And he came to the Resurrection only because he was prepared to lose his mortal life as the price of being faithful.

This is the context in which the Pope cites martyrdom. He was not moralising (as some local critics wrongly supposed). He was saying that the martyrs' witness to faithfulness loses all sense if their difficult circumstances would have allowed legitimate exceptions after all.

Of course, from the "world's" perspective, martyrdom *doesn't* make sense. Nor does the gospel's call to be different from the world.

Discernment
The Pope draws on insights from psychology, anthropology, philosophy and theology. But his method is not limited to theological reasoning. Rather, it involves discernment – discerning in the light of the gospel what is authentically human.

In this way, he identifies certain boundaries. He names positions that are not consistent with Catholic teaching.

This does not depend on how well he may or may not have understood some recent moral theories. He even acknowledges that the arguments used by the Magisterium can be limited and inadequate and improved upon (cf n.110).

The admission does nsot mean that reasoning can be substituted by appeal to authority (the weakest of all arguments). Spiritual discernment involves tapping into that gift of the Holy Spirit by which the Church (the whole baptised people) has a sure sense of what belongs to the faith and what doesn't.

Just as we are sometimes intuitively certain about something before we can prove it, so too, the Church can be sure about what is ture and what is not before we can explain it.

Theological reasoning is always in a catching up position vis-à-vis the Church's faith.

We can expect something similar for Christian morality because it is, after all, an expression of Christian faith; "faith is a decision involving the whose of one's existence" (n.88).

By offering us this discernment, the Pope is doing what it is his duty and vocation to do, - and ours to heed.

In-house debate
The Pope insists that some actions are wrong, no matter what the intentions or the circumstances or the consequences. The Catholic Church looks to the *meaning* of our actions – as well as to the individual's intentions and the circumstances.

Theologians point out, of course, that circumstances can make the difference between right and wrong. Killing may or may not be murder, depending on the circumstances.

In fact, many of the wrong actions listed by the Pope in this context (quoted above) already include specific circumstances.

The question is whether there are some actions that are morally wrong before any circumstances are taken into consideration. Against Proportionalism, the Pope is saying

"Yes", - actions which contradict the meaning of human nature can never be authentically human (and therefore never directed towards God).

These are called wrong "in themselves" or intrinsically wrong".

Some theologians may well argue that the theories they have developed are different from what the Encyclical describes.

Proportionalism does not try to justify morally wrong actions by a good intention.

The "fundamental option" theory does not dissociate a person's fundamental option from their particular actions as the Encyclical alleges, but actually emphasis the relationship between them.

How does this affect the Encyclical? In response, I would make three points:

1. Where the cap does not fit, so much the better. After all, it was not the Pope's intention to condemn particular theologians. His intention was to name particular positions which are not consistent with the Church's teaching (cf n.29) and this he was still able to do.

2. Even if the extreme positions described in the Encyclical are not the positions held by these theologians, nevertheless, there are other people who pick up their theories, only partly understand them, and misapply them. These extremes did need to be named.

   It would be a great waste if this Encyclical were to be remembered only for debate on whether it accurately described the positions of particular theologians. As another commentator rightly says "there are many who are hungry for the core message of the Encyclical" (*The Tablet*, London, 4 December 1993).

   An Anglican observer has suggested

   > Nothing more serious is implied than that the Pope has a clearer view of wider intellectual trends than he has of what Catholic theologians are up to (O O'Donovan, *The Tablet*, London, 27 November 1993).

3. For those of us who have followed these debates from the sidelines for several decades, it is frustrating to see the "talking past" each other that goes on. To see the same misunderstandings carried over into an encyclical is not edifying, even though it does not prevent the Pope from achieving his main purpose.

   But perhaps there is a lesson to be learned. The "children of this world" have long since learned the importance of "process". The recent dramatic breakthrough in mutual understanding between Israelis and the PLO only happened because they spent days living together under the same roof, eating together and talking into the night, as fellow human beings.

   It is too much to hope for similar things in the household of faith? What would happen if the Pope and the theologians concerned lived together for a few days in a

relaxed, unpressured environment, really getting to know each other and each other's thinking?

Yes, of course this would involve the disruption of other agenda and other routines. But the issue is one which the Pope clearly regards as a major "crisis" both in society and in the Church (cf nn. 4, 5).

It is Not irreverent to suggest that the Pope's objectives might be more effectively achieved by taking a look at other ways of doing them. Nor would such a process be uncongenial to the personality and the humanity of this Pope.

The Encyclical could still be written, but the Pope would have a first-hand understanding of what these theologians are saying.

Out of bounds

What then are the positions which the Pope teaches are incompatible with Catholic teaching? More positively, what are the positions he intends to safeguard? They include the following:

- Christian faith and Christian morality are inseparable in as much as the faith itself requires specific ways of living (cf nn.88, 89);
- Conscience *witnesses* to the truth about right and wrong; it does not decide by its own authority what is right or wrong (cf nn.57-64);
- The Church's teaching authority brings to light the truths that are implicit in the dignity of human nature and in the believer's acceptance of Christ (cf n.64);
- There are moral prohibitions which do not admit of exceptions, even when faithfulness is difficult;
- It is possible by some particular decisions and actions to overturn our fundamental commitment to God, and to disinherit ourselves from :"the kingdom of God" (cf n.70);
- The morality of some actions is determined not by their consequences or a person's intentions only, but by whether they are true to human nature (cf nn.78-80);
- An action which is morally wrong cannot be made right by circumstances or by one's intentions (cf n.79);
- Natural inclinations (of the body) can be right or wrong, depending on whether they are in harmony with the meaning of the body and directed t a person's authentic fulfilment (cf n.50).

The Pope is saying that any theories which imply denial of these basic truths are not compatible with Catholic teaching.

The particular theories he names are wrong only if they are understood in a way that contradicts Catholic teaching (cf n.70).

The Pope invites theologians to continue their work, but always as a work "of the Church":

> By its very nature and procedures, authentic theology can flourish and develop only through a committed and responsible participation in and "belonging" to the Church as a "community of faith". In turn, the fruits of theological research and deeper insight become a source of enrichment for the Church and her life of faith (n.109).

This is also why we should be grateful for the work of our theologians.

Conclusion

Catholic moral theology is keenly aware that the journey in Christian virtue is only gradual and that not all our failings are fully sinful. Even when we are guilty, the Church's practice is *Rich in Mercy* (to use the title of another of John Paul's Encyclicals).

The present Encyclical is saying that we do not have to water down the *objective* requirements of the moral law itself in order to allow for human frailty.

We are challenged to accept the radical call of the gospel, which is in sharp contrast with worldly ideologies.

In the present social and historical context, this reminder is prophetic.

It would be ironic if the Encyclical received more respect from thinking non-Catholics than from Catholics! Or is that part of the cost of being prophetic?