

AARON TYLER

RECOGNITION AND RESTRAINT: RELOCATING A JUST PEACE IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Abstract. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* continues to proffer a dynamic and relevant contribution to the ethical discourse surrounding just peacemaking. Concerning the human phenomena of organized violent conflict, this article explores the textual and philosophical resources advocating restraint and recognition within *Veritatis Splendor*. It investigates how these two concepts might be understood within an integrative moral framework of freedom and truth, and how they locate intrinsic meaning within a variety of cultural contexts. Moreover, this article demonstrate how these two faith-informed concepts, espoused within the main conceptual tenets of the encyclical, might be harnessed in a more deliberate way in the field of moral philosophy to help facilitate more inclusive and germane strategies for normative judgments in the praxis of just peacemaking.

Keywords: just war, reconciliation, Christian ethics, peacemaking, human rights, human dignity, conflict transformation

1. Recognition. 2. Restraint. 3. Conclusion.

Threats of international terrorism and a rise in regional and global identity conflicts over the past two decades may represent new and dominating geopolitical trends of organized violence, but the dehumanizing behavior and destructive aggression that often accompany these phenomena are as old as human history. These contemporary dangers do not involve new moral or immoral precepts. While these trends may

represent organized violence wearing new clothes and robed in new ideologies and advancing technologies belonging to a contemporary historical context, the same moral species are at work and in question. Questions of killing and murder, revenge and self-defense, just cause and unjust aggression, preemption and prevention, guilt and innocence: these are not new ethical challenges. They fall well within the timeless moral challenges accompanying the enduring human enterprise of war.

On the persisting questions of war and peace, John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* – now two decades old – continues to proffer a relevant contribution to the ethical discourse permeating these modern typologies of conflict. In particular, *Veritatis Splendor* seeks to revitalize the applicability and immutability of two underlying ethical concepts: *recognition* and *restraint*. Rooted in traditional Christian ethical discourse, the concepts remain two indispensable and life-affirming categories espoused through *Veritatis Splendor* and, more generally, the moral archeology and architecture of the Christian tradition. Of course, one can locate the significance of *recognition* and *restraint* in contemporary trends of moral philosophy, applied ethics, and international law, as well. What *Veritatis Splendor* does is offer language that attempts to deepen these terms, not only in their horizontal application, but also in their vertical applications – especially as they relate to freedom and truth as revealed in the Christian Gospels. At the same time, this encyclical challenges conventional applications of these concepts in local and global affairs, offering an ethics perspective with minimal palatability in the public square due to its uncompromising position on the inviolable good or evil of human behavior. *Veritatis Splendor* argues for a position of deontological absolutism as correct and applicable in a temporal environment where teleological proportionalism is the overwhelming common denominator for practitioners of politics, peacebuilding, and diplomacy.

This paper looks at how the two concepts of *recognition* and *restraint* are conceptualized through the moral framework espoused in *Veritatis Splendor*. It considers their relevance and limitations in the applied ethics of international relations and global engagement. It asks how a framework of moral absolutism, such as that championed in the encyclical, can flourish, or at minimum function, within the muddy

realities of human coexistence. More specifically, what are the implications for Christians and the Church as they seek to participate fully and faithfully in the often-volatile public square?

This article is not a philosophical or theological exposition in the traditional sense. Its intention is largely pragmatic, designed to contribute an analysis of the applicability of absolute moral norms in the convoluted realm of geopolitics. It is ultimately concerned with better understanding the ethical obligations in and surrounding organized violence or war, its prevention and transformation, and the contribution catholic moral teaching might proffer this tireless human endeavor.

Two central questions are espoused in the papal treatise, *Veritatis Splendor*: “What good must I do?” and “How do I distinguish good from evil?”¹ Embedded in the nature and purpose of these two questions, one may find *recognition* and *restraint* as pivotal criteria in humanity’s search for the moral life.

1. RECOGNITION

What Good Must I Do?

This question, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” is found in the Gospel account of the rich young man’s encounter with Jesus.² The young man approaches Jesus with a seminal question, which the Church has rested heavily upon in its effort to understand the moral teaching of Christ. According to John Paul II, “for the young man, the *question* is not so much about rules to be followed, but *about the full meaning of life*.”³ “It is *an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every man*,” he continues, “for it is about the moral good which must be done, and about eternal life.”⁴

In answering this question of *doing good*, Jesus redirects the man’s inquiry and attention to God, who alone is good.⁵ Following this line

¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), 2.

² Matthew 19:16.

³ *Veritatis Splendor*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19.

of teaching, Jesus – who is acknowledged in the Christian tradition as both God and Man – is defined as the embodiment of the good and thus the model for moral action. According to *Veritatis Splendor*, the moral life is a response or reflection of the goodness that is God. Moreover, created in the “image of God,”⁶ humankind is tasked with loving what and whom God loves. This is evinced most fully in Jesus’s affirmation of the young man’s desire to love his neighbor as himself. John Paul II’s encyclical clarifies the essence of this teaching: “In this commandment we find a precise expression of *the singular dignity of the human person*, »the only creature that God has wanted for its own sake«. The different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections of the one commandment about the good of the person.”⁷ Honoring and protecting the good of the person, then, begins and ends with *recognition* of each person’s singular dignity as purposefully created in the *imago Dei* and thus wholly worthy of God’s love and that of humankind’s. Consequently, “the origin, the subject and the purpose of all social institutions is and should be the human person.”⁸ The moral life, as understood here, begins with recognizing the image of God in each person and is iterated through the model and teachings of Jesus. In its purest form, then, *recognition* must include all categories of person: perpetrator and victim, combatant and non-combatant, enemy and friend, rich and poor, citizen and stranger.⁹

The history of Christianity, as manifested through various contexts of culture, politics, and empire, reveals imperfect and sometimes tragic results in pursuit of this task. Moments of crusade, inquisition, and exclusion, mixed with episodes of *caritas* and inclusion, undoubtedly complicate the picture of Christianity’s recognition of the Other. This is as much a consequence of human temptation as it is of human frailty in the faith-based pursuit of imitating the way of Jesus. Nonetheless, *recognition* of the Other remains a persevering principle informing

⁶ Genesis 1:26.

⁷ *Veritatis Splendor*, 13.

⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 25; quoted in *Veritatis Splendor*, 97.

⁹ See for instance, Matthew 5 and Matthew 25:35–40.

the ethical ideal espoused in the Church and the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

Perhaps for the purposes of temporal application in the pragmatic realm of global affairs, the encyclical's exposition on *recognition* can be defined as simply believing in the goodness of another, acknowledging that person or community as having inherent value and equality, meriting relationship simply because of their sacred humanity. Such *recognition* is needed to sustain peaceful coexistence in civil society. Without it, social segregation, oppression, and destruction ultimately occur. In his article, *Politics of Recognition*, philosopher Charles Taylor argues that "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (...) misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need."¹⁰

Many contemporary global conflicts are occupied with the politics of "misrecognition," with communal groups protesting the lack of recognition as equals – and all the political and material factors that should accompany such recognition. The cause and solution for conflicts of recognition are found in the quality and nature of social relationships. How do people perceive and understand each other? Is conversation possible? Can disagreement occur without dehumanization? Within such divisive contexts, normative theories and peacebuilding strategies of mutual recognition can play a critical role helping societies refashion positive conceptualizations of the self and the Other.

Of course there are many pathologies of *recognition*. Birthed out of the age of Enlightenment and the tumult of revolution, political documents like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Declaration

¹⁰ Ch. Taylor, *Politics of Recognition*, in: *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. A. Gutman, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1994, 25–26.

of Independence espoused in earnest a series of sacred and inalienable rights belonging to each person, simply because of his innate dignity and nature as a human being. Evolving over a century and a half – through the industrial revolution, the rise of the nation-state, and the horrors of two world wars – this anthem of human dignity and inalienable rights emerged in prominence in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

The underlying political idea here was to ground the rule of law upon recognition of humankind's nature as autonomous individuals, worthy of dignity and respect. This dignity, however, while benefiting from the moral theology of religious thinkers over the centuries, was largely rooted in a moral philosophy centered on human reason alone. In addition, this human dignity, espoused clearly in thinkers like Rousseau and Kant, would focus on the autonomy of the individual as an end in herself. Thus, freedom meant the sovereignty to be and to choose.

This moral-political framework of human dignity continues to inform the rule of law and the diplomacy of states, at least rhetorically. *Recognition*, as a concept of moral philosophy, permeates the constellation of our modern global society. Global politics, economics, and citizenship find sustenance in this pragmatic ethic.

What *Veritatis Splendor* offers moral philosophy is an intensified metaphysical exposition on *recognition*, whereby one's inviolable dignity acquires a sacred significance through human and spiritual reasoning. Moreover, the *recognition* espoused in *Veritatis Splendor* challenges the conventional secular paradigms of relativism and skepticism, not only of human recognition, but also of human freedom. It does so by attaching freedom to truth. The subjective, post-modern conceptualization of recognition subjugates moral judgment to "being at peace with oneself." As an end in one's self, "one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience."¹¹ While the modern and post-modern conceptualization of freedom and recognition begin with the view of the individual as a "self-starter" or "originator," in *Veritatis Splendor* – freedom and morality begin with the view of the individual as a "responder," recognizing that the ultimate end or good

¹¹ *Veritatis Splendor*, 32.

rests not with oneself, but with the one who initiated and designed creation.¹² This faith-based understanding of mutual recognition is most impactful as it encourages societies – especially those where religion has played a role in violent conflict and is a credible ingredient in the public square – to search beyond an autonomous, self-focused understanding of dignity to discover a purpose-driven and spiritual self-realization of what it means to be and to belong.

Transitioning from this moral theology to applied ethics is not easy. The simplicity of the Gospel and the “right” and “wrong” deontology proffered by the Church does not deny the complex and confounding realities in which this ethic is applied. It does not pretend that the “right” will be easy to implement or the outcome pleasant. Nonetheless, while *Veritatis Splendor* posits a clear position on *recognition*, it also creates difficult questions.

For instance, how does the city of man, the world of culture respond to this “ultimate end” of pleasing God redacted in *Veritatis Splendor*? Can an action in the context of war, or for the sake of peace, be morally wrong yet absolutely necessary? Can there be a relative position on truth and still an absolute position on *recognition*? While this deeper *recognition* might be realized on an individual level and an ecclesial level – though difficult in itself – how might this translate to the body politic, to the nation-state, where different experiences, religions, cultures, intersect, if not collide, to complicate the moral history and architecture of a place. Should it be an expectation that political morality mirror ecclesial morality? Is such an expectation impossible, if not unwise? Consensus via a teleological process is the conventional preference for most regimes (and individuals, for that matter); but can the body politic, as a temporal entity, embrace and employ a moral objectivity as definitive for policymaking? Indeed, martyrdom has not been a favored outcome for empires or tribes.

¹² For an insightful look at the traditional Abrahamic paradigm of “freedom” as “responders” as opposed to “self-starters,” see D.B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in the Abrahamic Traditions*, International Philosophical Quarterly 40(2000)2, 162.

While pursuing an objective moral order like that espoused in *Veritatis Splendor* is arguably instinctive by nature,¹³ a moral history of the past century illustrates how ethical fitness of a person or community does not simply exist; rather, it requires diligent moral reflection and regular consideration of moral values and ethical reasoning. Here the Church's voice, as a moral compass is important. Through pastoral and educative initiative, *Veritatis Splendor* encourages a reconsideration of *recognition*, which is urgently needed in the contemporary public square.

2. RESTRAINT

How do I distinguish good from evil?

In considering the nature of the One who alone is good and the dignity God confers on human kind, *Veritatis Splendor* illustrates how *recognition* is a precondition to mercy, and *restraint*, as an ethical responsibility, is a function or response of mercy. In essence, while judgment between right and wrong is expected, as the Church works to challenge contemporary "*confusions between good and evil*," mercy must always accompany freedom and truth.¹⁴ The encyclical establishes this point quite clearly: "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." 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 conversation 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."¹⁵

Undergirding the pastoral and educative roles of the Church in the public square is this overarching value of mercy, an ecclesial expectation,

¹³ *Veritatis Splendor*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

necessary for facilitating ethical clarity and fitness within and across communities. Judgment is important, but exemplifying the mercy of the Gospels is essential, especially in the pragmatic and convoluted realms of foreign policy and global engagement. This pastoral expectation is outlined in *Veritatis Splendor* and reinforced in Pope Francis's recent encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis writes, "as far as external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues: »In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies. This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree«."16

Restraint as a function of mercy and the moral order embraced by the Church is also a decisive element of ethical reasoning in global affairs and public policymaking. Perhaps it is at this juncture of policymaking where the intersection of temporal politics and the moral imagination is most critical. The Jesuit Theologian, John Courtney Murray, defined public policy as "the meeting place of the world of power and the world of morality."¹⁷ This is clearly seen in those policies surrounding war and peace – a place where power and mercy not only intersect, but oftentimes collide. In the context of war, *restraint* becomes an important means for subordinating the important, but lower, values of defense or "righting a grievous wrong" to the higher pursuit of *recognizing* the inherent worth and sanctity of the Other, even the enemy. Such awareness is necessary, not only to avoid unlimited violence, but to realize a just and lasting peace. To this end, Christianity has contributed to humanity's ever-evolving "just war" tradition, whereby the decision to wage and prosecute war is qualified with severe caveats for restraint.¹⁸ The call for *restraint* in the pursuit of just peace, according to John

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 37; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 30, a. 4.

¹⁷ J.C. Murray, *Remarks on the Moral Problem of War*, *Theological Studies* 20(1959), 59–60.

¹⁸ See, for instance, J. Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, Harvard University Press, Boston MA 2009; J.T. Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1984; and

Courtney Murray, “is reached by a dialectical process, an alternation between principle and fact.”¹⁹ The fact being that war remains a brutal instrument in human affairs, which in the most extreme cases may be necessary. The principle in this dialectical process is that, in light of the human condition, use of force may be necessary but only in dire cases and with significant *restraint*. From this philosophical perspective, the moral doctrine of war endures within what Murray calls the “triple traditional function” of the Church: “to condemn war as evil, to limit the evil it entails, and to humanize its conduct as much as possible.”²⁰

Yet, Murray’s description of the Church’s moral doctrine of war seems, in some ways, more akin to teleological or proportionalist decision making rather than the deontological rendition of *Veritatis Splendor*. From this author’s perspective, the moral architecture championed through *Veritatis Splendor* would make war, in almost any context, an intrinsic evil. Within the encyclical’s scaffolding of the natural moral order, conceiving of a war where moral absolutes are applied and maintained in the decision to pursue war (*jus ad bellum*) and its waging (*jus in bello*) cannot, or has yet be, demonstrated. Just War criteria like *Just Cause*, *Limited Objective*, and *Proportionality* are regularly consumed by subjectivity, expediency, and historical context. Indeed, the ethical limitation a deontological position imposes on war’s justification is illustrated most clearly in the moral slide that too often accompanies the prosecution of organized violence.

In his text, *Humanity*, which explores the psychological causality of inhumanity, ethicist Jonathan Glover challenges the likelihood of just war within humanity’s temporal reality. Glover emphasizes two innate “human responses” as natural restraints against dehumanization and mutual harm: respect and sympathy. While not delving into the origins of these responses, he argues that when these two dispositions are suppressed through acts of violence, humiliation, or dominance, the cruelties of war become possible. He illustrates this moral slide through

Religious Perspectives on War: Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Attitudes Toward Force, ed. D. Smock, United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C. 2002.

¹⁹ J.C. Murray, op. cit., 57.

²⁰ Ibid.

the acts of torture: “Atrocities are easier if the human responses are weakened. (...) Atrocities are easier to commit if respect for the victims can be neutralized. For this reason, humiliation handed out by those with power can be ominous. The link between humiliation and atrocity is often found.”²¹ The violent narratives and forms of oppressive reeducation that result from the erosion of moral responses and accompany the pursuits of limited and total war preclude the possibility of a moral order in keeping with that espoused in *Veritatis Splendor*. When an individual and community’s moral responses are intact and ethical and spiritual fitness are maintained, restraint from war is maximized and its justification limited only to that of a consequentialist or proportionalist vantage point.

According to Catholic moral teaching, a right moral act depends on the object chosen, the right intention, and the immediate circumstances.²² Policymakers may demonstrate how the elements of right intention (common good) and immediate circumstance may justify war as a moral act; yet, the third and final constitutive consideration of the inherent good or evil of the object chosen (war) remains non-demonstrative and the overarching moral hazard. Failing this final criterion, war endures as an intrinsic evil and beyond the confines of an authentic moral order. From this perspective of moral absolutism, “no evil done with a good intention can be excused”²³; thus, it seems, a good outcome and right intention cannot alter the moral species of war.

Catholic theologian and jurist, Gerard Powers, seeks to mediate this moral incongruity through an adroit and insightful description of Christianity’s Just War doctrine as an *interim ethic*, with obsolescence of war as the underlying goal. According to Powers, the Church’s position of a “restricted just war ethic” (as opposed to a “permissive” one) finds justification only in its direct connection with an ethic of peacebuilding.²⁴

²¹ J. Glover, *Humanity*, Yale University Press, London 1999, 22, 35–36.

²² Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Three, *Life in Christ*, 1750.

²³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Duo Praecepta Caritatis et in Decem Legis Praecepta. De Dilectione Dei: Opuscula Theologica*, II, No. 1168, Ed. Taurinen 1954, 250; quoted in *Veritatis Splendor*, 78.

²⁴ G. Power, *From an Ethics of War to and Ethics of Peacebuilding*, in: *From Just War to Modern Peace Ethics*, ed. H.-G. Justenhoven, W.A. Barbieri Jr., Walter de

It is grounded on a morally responsible understanding and utilization of power, whereby just war is inextricably linked to the overarching project of transformative peace. Powers, and others, who advance this restrictive understanding of just war would point to humanitarian intervention as an example of the necessary use of war. Of course, distinguishing intent in the case of humanitarian intervention is important, as the primary motivation for a nation-state's military intercession, while enveloped in the rhetoric of *caritas*, is often accompanied, if not driven, by pursuits of national-interest and political security. As mentioned above, locating, managing, and insuring a limited objective, right intention, and proportionality in a restrictive just war are convoluted, at best. Moreover, declaring just war as an interim ethic seems to imply the moral hazard still rests in the object or act of war itself.

Nonetheless, whether or not one interprets from catholic moral theology that non-violence is an unmitigated, intrinsic good or that restrictive just war is within the realm of natural law and right moral order, it is clear the Catholic Church has not shied away from engaging the moral hazards of war and peace and has endeavored over the centuries to develop a living moral doctrine that seeks to mediate between ethical consistency and historical relevancy. Whether or not Catholic moral teaching restricts or prohibits the act of war, it is clear that a radical position of *restraint* – as a consequence of *recognition* and a function of mercy – is countenanced. Such a position is not easy. It can be “extremely difficult, but it is not impossible.”²⁵ According to *Veritatis Splendor*, it is human freedom in cooperation with divine grace that enables such a position.²⁶ Moreover, through the Church's pastoral and educative roles in society and the public square, this moral position of *restraint* on the issue of war can encourage policymakers contemplating organized violence or communities currently in conflict to go beyond the procedural mechanics of *how* to limit war and, instead, contemplate more intensely on *why* decisive restraint is necessary. In other words, effective pursuit of just peace would require focusing on the first priority

Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin 2012, 281.

²⁵ *Veritatis Splendor*, 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

of *recognizing* the Other, not as an object of violence, but as created in the image of God, meriting – as a reflection of the Divine – authentic recognition. From this vantage point, sacred justification of violence is rarely – if ever – condoned, and never without emphasis on the first priorities of restorative justice and sustainable peace within and across human communities.

3. CONCLUSION

In the midst of violent conflict, the Church and faith-based lay organizations active in their local communities can create humanizing spaces where *recognition* of the Other is advocated and *restraint* is emphasized. As *Veritatis Splendor* makes clear, oftentimes this moral position is prophetic and counter-cultural; yet, this is when it is most necessary. To speak truth to power, to champion peace in conflict, to advocate restraint over reckoning, to place individual well-being above that of the state, these are areas where the authentic voices of the Church are making significant contributions in the temporal pursuits of just peace.

Transitioning from moral theology to applied ethics is not easy. The *simplicity* of the Gospel and the “right” and “wrong” deontology professed by the Church do not deny the complex and confounding realities in which this ethic is applied. It does not pretend that the “right” will be easy to implement or the outcome pleasant.

Considering today’s geopolitical landscape and the public discourse on the realities of organized violence, *Veritatis Splendor* offers an exercise in ethical fitness for the contemporary moral conscience. Through educative and pastoral guidance it encourages “the development of mature moral values,”²⁷ emphasizing a position of *restraint* and *recognition* in the use of power and the service of peace.

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