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Report on the Symposium 30 Years After “*Veritatis Splendor*.” *Moral Absolutes and War – War on Moral Absolutes*, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw, December 13, 2023

Abstract. The 2023 symposium at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University focused on Christian ethics, revisiting key themes from Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. The discussion highlighted the enduring relevance of absolute moral norms and examined shifts in the Catholic Church’s stance on capital punishment and killing in war, emphasizing the significance of intention and the object of a moral act in moral reasoning. The event also addressed Catholic perspectives on war ethics, contrasting the just war doctrine with pacifist views. Additional topics included the idea of the indissolubility of marriage amid contemporary societal changes and the idea of moral autonomy, understood as the central point of contention between Kantian ethics and the Church’s traditional moral doctrine.

Keywords: moral absolutes; *Veritatis Splendor*; capital punishment; killing in war; indissolubility of marriage; moral autonomy

The debate over the foundational principles of an ethical evaluation of human action has been a central part of the disputes within moral philosophy from its very beginning. For nearly two millennia, the essential contribution of Christian (especially Catholic) thinkers to this debate focused on affirming the need to recognize a set of moral absolutes as delineating the impassable boundaries of ethically plausible justifications for any individual human undertaking. This situation changed dramatically in the mid-20th century: profound shifts in the paradigm of Christian thinking about the foundations of morality were marked by the relocation of the central axis of the controversy over the very category of absolute moral prohibitions into the domain of Catholic moral theology. An attempt to respond to the ensuing crisis in the identity of the Catholic moral doctrine was Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993).

In 2013, the Institute of Philosophy at Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw (UKSW) organized an international

conference to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the publication of this significant document. The special guests of the conference were prominent contemporary thinkers aligned with the key message of *Veritatis Splendor*: Professor John Finnis (Finnis, 2015) and Professor Josef Seifert (Seifert, 2015a; 2015b). Ten years after this event, on December 13, 2023, the Institute of Philosophy at UKSW hosted a symposium focused once again on one of the most important encyclicals of the Polish pope, with Professor John Finnis accepting the invitation to Warsaw once more. A notable theme of this second round of the debate regarding the fundamental framework of Christian ethical theories – one related to current international event – was the question of moral permissibility of killing during military operations.

In the opening address, *Veritatis Splendor, Capital Punishment and Lethal Acts in War*, John Finnis (University of Oxford, University of Notre Dame) critiqued the recent reinterpretation of moral absolutes in Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016), advocating for the continued relevance of absolute moral norms in ethical discourse. He referenced his 1991 paper that examined the role of the object of an act in Aquinas's moral philosophy, emphasizing the distinction between object and intention in moral actions. The speaker then discussed the 2018 reformulation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2267 (2018), pointing out a shift in the Church's teaching on capital punishment initiated during the pontificates of Pius XII and John Paul II. According to Finnis, while the new formulation draws a lot of attention, its broader implications for military ethics, particularly regarding the intentionality of killing in the context of legitimate defense, remain underexplored. The Church's position requires a meticulous examination of what constitutes intention in moral decision-making, rejecting theories like proportionalism and situationism that undermine the significance of intention and the nature of moral acts. Ultimately, as argued by Finnis the *Catechism* articulates a refined moral judgment about the permissibility of killing:

while self-defense against grave harm is permissible, the intention to kill – particularly in the case of capital punishment – contradicts the commandment to respect human life. This principle reinforces the belief that to take life intentionally is to overstep the divine authority granted solely to God, affirming the Church’s longstanding commitment to uphold the sanctity and dignity of all human life. At the same time, the revisions to the *Catechism*, guided by the Pope’s 2017 speech, generate concerns by focusing almost exclusively on human dignity while failing to clarify the other moral issues surrounding capital punishment.

In his contribution to the symposium, Adam Cebula (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) in the paper *Catholic Ethics of War. On the Plausibility of Christian Pacifism* proposed a response to the radical anti-war remarks made by Pope Francis in the course of the last few years. According to Cebula, the foundational legal and ethical frameworks concerning warfare, as established by influential Christian thinkers throughout history, should be recapitulated. As argued by the speaker, one should also critically examine the manner in which Pope Francis appears to reject the just war doctrine, suggesting an inherent moral equivalence between the warring parties – even in cases where the acts of aggression perpetrated by one of them are both evident and unprovoked. What is more, an assessment is needed of the reasonableness and moral implications of the Pope’s apparent belief that a political community under attack should refrain from exposing its members to enemy violence unless there is a substantiated prospect of achieving a relatively swift success in its defensive actions. The speaker proposed that a unique eschatological perspective – absent from modern, secularized interpretations of the just war theory – be recognized as the essential hallmark of Christian war ethics. This perspective, while guarding against the risk of glorifying the state in a potentially harmful, quasi-metaphysical way, nonetheless imparts deep meaning to the pursuit of a just war, even when it faces likely defeat. By analogy with the Christian understanding

of martyrdom, the readiness to sacrifice one's life for a righteous cause remains justifiable, even when the immediate likelihood of military success is minimal.

Stipe Buzar (Libertas međunarodno sveučilište, Zagreb, Croatia) addressed the issue of the probability of success of a military operation in a different manner in his presentation entitled *Do the Weak have a Right to Fight the Strong? Moral Absolutes and the Probability of Success*. According to him, the *jus ad bellum* criterion of the probability of success is often seen as unjust, as it prevents weaker parties in potential or actual military conflicts from engaging in organized violence, even when such an action is crucial for their survival. This perception – that the probability of success is an unfair standard – primarily holds if: (1) the weaker party's primary objective is its own survival. In such cases, this requirement should arguably be considered inapplicable. However, if: (2) survival is not deemed the dominant concern, then the probability of success remains relevant. The speaker examined this position through the lens of the famous Melian Dialogue in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (2004) and applied his analysis to Ukraine's current defensive conflict against Russia, addressing the issue of Ukraine's right to war and the potential moral obligation of its government to consider negotiations.

The paper *Legal dissolubility and indissolubility of marriage* presented by Andrzej Waleszczyński (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) examined one of the rarely disputed, yet very significant developments in the modern understanding of the institution of marriage. As he claimed, contemporary societal changes are reshaping how intimate relationships and marriage are perceived and defined within both social and legal frameworks. On the one hand, a sweeping legalization of various forms of personal unions is underway. On the other, there is a growing movement within some legislatures to abandon the state's role in formally sanctioning marriage as an institution, reducing marital relationships to private or local affairs. In this evolving context, according to Waleszczyński,

Christian philosophy offers valuable insights for addressing the contemporary crisis in intimate and marital relationships. Central to Christian philosophy is the principle of marital indissolubility, a concept historically grounded in natural law. Given the current social landscape, Christian philosophy may benefit from articulating and proposing a framework for legally recognizing the indissolubility of marriage. Acknowledgment of such a binding form of marriage by the state could serve to reinforce enduring partnerships, which are essential for the upbringing of children and for promoting the continuity and stability of the society.

Lastly, Andrzej Kobyliński (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) put forth a synthetic argument regarding the contemporary predicament of Christian ethics in the paper *What Autonomy of Morality? The Dispute Over Immanuel Kant's Project in Christian Ethical Thought*. The speaker examined the concept of moral autonomy, particularly as discussed in the Catholic Church's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (John Paul II, 1993), and its connection to Immanuel Kant's philosophical framework. According to Kobyliński, the idea of an autonomous morality, established in Kant's work, has profoundly shaped Western ethics, sparking considerable debate in both secular and Christian thought. Kant's model proposes a morality guided by universal, self-imposed laws, independent of external or divine authority. This model contrasts with Christian ethics, which often underscores moral law as divinely rooted, challenging Kant's detachment from transcendence. As argued by Kobyliński, the Catholic perspective distinguishes between "legitimate autonomy," where practical reason discerns moral law while acknowledging its divine origin, and "false autonomy," which posits morality as a human construct. Proponents of "faith ethics" argue that morality ultimately relies on faith and divine purpose, in contrast to models that fully embrace Kantian autonomy. *Veritatis Splendor* reasserted the Church's stance against autonomous morality divorced from God, linking moral relativism and certain ethical crises, such as clerical abuse, to this separation.

Three of the papers presented during the symposium (by John Finnis, Stipe Buzar, and Adam Cebula) are published in this issue of *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* (Adam Cebula's paper addresses the problematic aspects of pacifism from a more general perspective than his contribution to the symposium). One can expect that the main theme of John Paul II's most debated encyclical will continue to inspire philosophical discussions, compelling not only Christian thinkers to confront the issue of the palpability of moral absolutes.

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DOI 10.21697/spch.2024.60.5.02



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Received: 30/10/2024. Reviewed: 5/12/2024. Accepted: 12/12/2024.