



## ***The Splendor of Truth*** **Interpretive Review**

**John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth [Veritatis Splendor]* (Vatican, Rome: October 1993).<sup>1</sup>**

“THE SPLENDOR OF TRUTH shines forth in all the works of the Creator and in a special way in man, created in the image and likeness of God.”<sup>2</sup> With these words Pope John Paul II began his 10th encyclical since he assumed the pontifical office in 1978. *The Splendor of Truth [Veritatis Splendor]* is an intense and meticulously reasoned document devoted to the supreme importance of truth and the freedom that it brings. It is an encyclical that reflects a lifetime of scholarly research and the deep, lifelong convictions of its author.

Pope John Paul II was the first non-Italian pontiff in over 450 years. As a young man in Poland during World War II, Karol Wojtyła left the university and became a chemical worker. In 1942 he abruptly abandoned his employment with the determination to become a priest. He found wartime refuge in the palace of the archbishop of Krakow. After ordination to the priesthood in 1946, he continued his studies at the Angelicum University in Rome, where he earned his doctorate in ethics. Later, he was named professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin, shortly becoming an internationally recognized scholar. Meanwhile, he was successively named bishop, archbishop and cardinal.<sup>3</sup> He played an active role in the councils of Vatican II and in the subsequent meetings of the bishops. In 1976 Pope Paul VI invited Cardinal Wojtyła to the Vatican to present a series of meditations at the annual Lenten retreat held by the pontiff and the officers of the Curia.<sup>4</sup> Soon after this retreat, Pope Paul VI's health began to fail, and he died in 1978. The Cardinalate then elected Cardinal Albino Luciani to the pontificate, and he assumed the title Pope John Paul I. His pontificate was tragically terminated by his untimely death just 34 days later.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of Pope John Paul I's death, the Cardinalate elected Karol Wojtyła to the pontificate, and he took the title Pope John Paul II.

### **A Mediated Presence**

From the time of his installation, Pope John Paul II tenaciously maintained his scholarship, his commitment to what he recognized as Peter's office, and his pastoral

care for the world and the “world’s church.” In order to appreciate the pontiff’s concerns, we need to realize that, from its beginning, the Roman Catholic Church has contended that God reaches mankind (male and female) through a mediated presence — through a third party or agent.<sup>6</sup> The Church has therefore been a bulwark against Gnosticism, secular humanism, and atheism, which directly or indirectly make man to be God or to possess God — and therefore to be in God’s immediate presence.

In *The Splendor of Truth [Veritatis Splendor]*, John Paul II eloquently appealed for the Church and the world to return to the truth as it is in Jesus and to the urgent mediation of that truth to a world in crisis. His ringing appeal was profoundly informative.

Without mediation, man must either die or propose to live in the immediate presence of God. However, these alternatives exclude human freedom, identity, individuality, willpower and responsibility. If man is God or is wholly possessed by God, all human identity, individuality, will, freedom and responsibility are merged into God alone. Without mediation, all relationships are lost, and man loses his own selfhood in only one Identity, one Individual, one active Will, one Freedom and one Responsibility.

The Pope showed that there is freedom only in the truth. “. . . [Y]ou will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32, RSV). John Paul II argued that the truth which frees mankind has been written as law in the heart of man. This truth is accessible to educated human reason and conscience. However, the education of human reason and conscience has been left to the mediatorial work of the Church, and particularly to its magisterial or priestly authority. The Pope contended that only by this means can those absolute and universal values so essential to mankind’s continued existence be maintained and advanced.<sup>7</sup>

In pursuing these arguments, Pope John Paul II followed the claims of rabbinical Judaism, maintained throughout Jewish history. Furthermore, in these arguments he followed the post-resurrectional claims of the early Christian church in Jerusalem. The central issue, both then and now, is the “truth” about freedom.

## “Sovereign Freedom”

The concept of “freedom” first emerged in connection with the master-slave relationship. Originally, freedom was defined as the right of the master to exercise domination and control over his slaves. This has become known as “sovereign freedom.” The master alone had life. Except for physical existence, slaves were “dead.” This concept of freedom has been pursued socially, politically and religiously for thousands of years. It is reflected in the so-called “divine right” of kings to exercise control over their subjects.<sup>8</sup>

This concept of sovereign freedom was grounded in mankind’s understanding of God’s rule over the human race, this world and the entire universe. Having arrived at the consciousness that law mediated God’s relationship to his Creation and the Creation’s relationship to God, the race mistakenly assumed that sovereign freedom was God’s right to dominate and control mankind through the mediatorial role of law. God was the dominating Master. Mankind were his submissive slaves.

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Ideas on sovereign freedom, along with other concepts of freedom, were developed, improved and widely applied by the time the Roman Empire occupied Palestine and subdued the Jews. These ideas were confirmed by Caesar Augustus himself.<sup>9</sup>

Then, “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son” (Galatians 4:4, RSV). It was shown that the ultimate expression of sovereign freedom was not God’s right to dominate and control man. It was God’s right to *become* man — to adopt mankind as his own reality. The incarnation of God as a Babe in Bethlehem, his selfless life, his suffering, death and resurrection, represent the uttermost revelation of true sovereign freedom. God the Master exercised his sovereign right by becoming the Subject — the Slave — and by taking that slavehood to its end in death. By his act of death and resurrection, God redeemed, he manumitted,<sup>10</sup> he released, he bought back all humanity from slavery.

. . . Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. — Philippians 2:5-8, RSV.<sup>11</sup>

By the exercise of his sovereign freedom, Jesus Christ fulfilled the law, which defined the relationship between master and slave-subject. He fulfilled that law to its fullest extent. “. . . Christ [indeed] is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Romans 10:4). For everyone who believes, Christ is the end of sovereign freedom. As Jesus himself declared, “No longer do I call you slaves [correct translation of the Greek, *doulos*], . . . but I have called you friends [Greek, *philos*]” (John 15:15, RSV, “slaves” supplied). Sovereign freedom found its conclusive expression in God’s own commitment to become man — the slave. Henceforth, freedom was to have wholly new definitions and meanings.

To now persist in advocating sovereign freedom as the right of the master — whether God, king or priest — to exercise exclusive and absolute right over his subjects is to ignore the Christ event. Since this supreme, climactic event, the attempted domination of mankind by kings, masters, priests or magisteria — or any other such usurpation of social, political or religious authority — is an act either of ignorance or of open defiance. It either ignores or defies God’s will, intention and fulfilled plan for man.

Pope John Paul II’s earnest and well-intended efforts to universalize and perpetuate God’s sovereign dominion over mankind through the medium of law and of the magisterium was a grave historical mistake — a mistake that we all have made.

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Those words from Calvary 2,000 years ago today apply to the pontiff, to all in supposed sovereign authority, and to each of us: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, RSV).

## Summary

In his 10th encyclical *The Splendor of Truth [Veritatis Splendor]*, Pope John Paul II stated the critical question of our time. Are truth and freedom mediated gifts to man, or do they reside autonomously (are they self-contained) within man? The pontiff was correct in vigorously deciding for the mediated nature of truth and freedom. However, he mistakenly reverted to the mediation of truth and sovereign freedom to man through the agencies of law and the ecclesial magisterium. In contrast to this, we need to understand that truth and freedom are gifts to man, not through the dominion of law or of the Church, but through the mediatorial presence of the risen Christ.

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## Endnotes

1. Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth [Veritatis Splendor]* (Culver City, CA: Pauline Books and Media, 1993), is available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/splendor-of-truth-usccb/1121681088](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/splendor-of-truth-usccb/1121681088).
2. Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth [Veritatis Splendor]* (Vatican, Rome: October 1993).
3. See *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s. v. “John Paul II.”
4. See Karol Wojtyla [Pope John Paul II], *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).
5. See *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “John Paul I.”
6. See Charles E. Curran, art. “Roman Catholicism,” *Encyclopaedia of Bioethics*, ed. Warren T. Reich (New York: Free Press, 1978), 4:1523.
7. See “*Veritatis Splendor [The Splendor of Truth]*”: Sidney Callahan, “What Is a Good Conscience?” *Commonweal* 120, no. 17 (8 October 1993): 8; Anonymous, “Catholic Theologian Rips Encyclical,” *Christian Century* (17-24 November 1993): 1153, 1154.
8. See Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
9. See *ibid.*, pp. 258ff.
10. A term meaning to free from slavery or bondage, emancipate.
11. See Patterson, *Freedom*, p. 336.

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