On October 5th of last year, 1993, the Encyclical Letter Veritatis Splendor of Pope John Paul II was formally released, addressed to “All the Bishops of the Catholic Church regarding certain Fundamental Questions of the Church’s Moral Teaching.” After the rather excited flurry of initial commentaries and critiques, the encyclical passed from headline news. Perhaps it is possible to begin a more balanced and objective reflection on the encyclical’s meaning, especially for moral education in the Philippines.

For immediately upon its release, the numerous commentaries on Veritatis Splendor were noted principally for their contradictory evaluations — either passionately critical or positive and laudatory. The major reason for such disparate critical judgments was clearly the critics’ widely divergent approaches to morality. By focusing on moral education rather than professional moral theology, much less on Church discipline, and precisely as pursued in our Philippine context, this brief commentary attempts a more limited evaluation. The aim is to focus on what may be helpful in drawing today’s Catholic Filipino to deeper “moral living in Christ.”

1. The encyclical letter itself, hereafter cited as VERSPL, concludes with: “Given in Rome, at Saint Peter’s, on 6 August, Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, in the year 1993, the fifteenth of my Pontificate,” and signed by John Paul II. Various explanations have been offered for the two month delay before its October release. But whatever the reasons were, the text itself seems to have remained unchanged.
Although the encyclical is addressed to "all Bishops of the Catholic Church" as a message for the "Pastors of the Church," it can be approached as an official commentary on current Catholic moral education. This is clear from the content of the encyclical itself, and from its concern about the teaching of moral theologians. Moreover, although VERSPL presents a "discernment of certain tendencies in present-day moral theology," our primary interest is not the particular moral theory of any current moral approach or specific Catholic moralist. Difficult as it may be, we wish to avoid the unfortunate polemical atmosphere that has tainted much current Catholic moral theology in the past 25 years. Rather the focus of this essay is on VERSPL as related directly to the education of Filipino youth and adults toward authentic moral living as disciples of Christ.

To pursue this aim of centering on moral education which is explicitly Christian and "Catholic," however, in no way means to ignore the many critiques of VERSPL that have been published. Moral theologians have the right to defend themselves against being charged with errors which they actually do not teach. Nevertheless, given Christian moral living as the ultimate goal for both the "revisionist" moralists and their opposite moralist

2. The Bishops are addressed precisely in view of exercising their prophetic, priestly, and kingly functions, regarding the "moral good for the life of the Church and of the world." Cf. esp. nos. 5, 30, 114-15. Partly as a result of this, some commentators have charged VERSPL with a certain authoritarian tone. Cf. Peter Hebblethwaite, National Catholic Reporter, 1 and 8 Oct. 1993.

3. Besides its extensive treatment of some current approaches to moral theology, and their disparity with traditional Church teaching (nos. 4-5), VERSPL includes a specific section on the role of moral theologians in the Church. Cf. nos. 109-13.

4. The unfortunate antagonistic relationship between traditional Catholic moral theology and the "revisionists" arose in great part from the publication of Paul VI's Encyclical Letter "Humanae Vitae" in 1968. Since then, a whole "revisionist school" of moral theology has developed, which, in questioning many of the more traditional Church positions, has created a certain polarization within contemporary Catholic moral theology. Cf. Vincent McNamara, Faith and Ethics (Washington: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1985); and his Love, Law and Christian Life, Basic Attitudes of Christian Morality (Wilmington: Glazier, 1988).

5. Among the outstanding Catholic moral theologians who were highly critical of certain aspects of VERSPL are: Charles Curran (Commonweal, Oct. 22, 1993); G. Daly (Doctrine & Life, Nov. 1993); Bernard Häring, CSSR (London Tablet, Oct. 23, 1993); and Richard McCormick, S.J. (America, Oct. 30, 1993).
counter-parts, it seems legitimate to pass over VERSPL's alleged misinterpretations and concentrate on the encyclical's positive value for moral education. This includes VERSPL's identifying certain mistaken moral attitudes and judgments that have become so widespread in today's world, not excluding our own Philippines.

Closer to this specific perspective are the various comments offered by editorialists, social scientists, and cultural analysts, who evaluated VERSPL relative to major moral problems in today's society. For example, those dealing with human rights, economic and political justice, family problems, violence, population growth, and ecology. The great majority of these commentaries gave high praise to VERSPL for its moral message, while a few rejected the encyclical with passionate vehemence.

These editorial commentaries offer a particular value for our purpose. For together with the "Letters to the Editor" that invariably follow such comments, they reveal the actual moral attitudes and perspectives prevalent among the educated reading class, and the appreciable differences in moral reasoning and sensibilities that typify today's "common [moral] sense."

LIMITATION OF THIS STUDY

Hence no effort is made here to offer anything like a full,


Other moralists have come closer to our particular focus by trying to relate VERSPL to specific individual moral cases. Cf. G. Hughes, S.J., The Month (Nov. 1993) 432-37.


8. An example of such rejection is given by the caricature of the encyclical, published as the cover article in Asiaweek (Oct. 27, 1993). Subsequent letters to the editor were largely critical of the very prejudiced and biased view presented under the sub-title: "John Paul II Listened to God and Misunderstood the Message."
comprehensive critique of VERSPL. Rather the following exposition simply presents some basic elements in the encyclical that are specifically relevant to Catholic moral education in the Philippines today, particularly as situated in the context sketched by the 2nd Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II). This commentary approaches VERSPL from the perspective of a religious educator rather than that of a professional moral theologian, since this perspective seems to promise more positive results.

One basic conviction proposed here is that the encyclical is actually concerned primarily with current Catholic moral teaching as it concretely influences the actual moral attitudes and mindsets of the educated Catholic faithful. Despite a number of indications to the contrary, it seems clear that VERSPL’s principal interest is not a negative critique or rejection of any particular approach to moral theology, or any particular moralist. Nor does the encyclical wish to obstruct legitimate, creative research in new moral problems, or impose a particular philosophical or theological position on all moralists (#29, p. 49). Rather its focus is on what it calls the crisis of a widespread loss among Christians and non-Christians alike, of a moral sense that recognizes objective moral norms (#106, p. 158). Thus VERSPL is interpreted here as primarily concerned with the current confusion in moral attitudes and values, and the general weakening of sound moral formation even among Catholics.

This way of viewing VERSPL is also prompted by the stress put on renewed catechesis by PCP II (#183). VERSPL can exert considerable influence on the future of our moral education and formation if it is made known and studied by ordinary adult Filipino Catholic laymen and women, that is, an audience that reaches beyond the relatively limited confines of the Bishops, priests, religious, and professional moral theologians. Both Vatican II and our own PCP II have stressed the education of Catholic lay men and women toward maturity in the Faith. An essential dimension of mature Faith entails the gradual formation of a truly Christian conscience and moral sense. Such appears

to be a primary concern of the encyclical as well.

Thus this evaluation of VERSPL is written principally from the religious educator’s perspective. VERSPL is seen in terms of developing a sound Christian moral sense in adult educated Filipino Catholics, within the particular socio-economic, political and cultural world of today. In the following discussion we shall take up certain key points of VERSPL significant for moral education in the Philippines, following the order of the encyclical itself.

**THE INTRODUCTION OF VERSPL**

The introduction to the encyclical carefully sketches the circumstances that occasioned VERSPL. Over the past century, the Vatican has developed its moral teaching, responding especially to the social problems of modern life. But “today it seems necessary to reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching . . . [the problem is] no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine” (#4, p. 8). Hence VERSPL focuses on “dealing with certain fundamental questions regarding the Church’s moral teaching” so as “to set forth . . . the principles of a moral teaching based on Sacred Scripture and the living Apostolic Tradition, and to shed light on the presuppositions and consequences. . . .” (#5, p. 11)

The introduction also states that the encyclical was possible only after the publication of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), which is quoted frequently together with John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation, “Reconciliatio et Paenitentia” (1984). But the source most frequently cited throughout VERSPL is the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (GS), a significant fact often missed by commentators. Such an oversight is a slight indication of the many difficulties met when attempting an unbiased reading and presentation of the encyc-

10. Despite the conscious attempt to keep to non-technical language, some sections of this commentary unavoidably employ certain technical moral terms and refer to particular current moral positions. Nevertheless, these usually have direct bearing on moral problems, attitudes and values that are common to our Filipino experience and context.
clical.

In general, then, we could say that the encyclical focuses on what used to be called general or fundamental moral which treats of the basic principles and realities governing Christian moral life. These include the Christian image of the human person, human freedom, conscience, the natural law, the place of Christ Himself, and the Church’s magisterium. Moreover VERSPL, following its very name, consistently stresses Truth as the ground for all moral living since it provides the foundation for morality’s objectivity. Recognizing Jesus Christ as the Truth then becomes the basis for all Christian moral teaching and living.

CHAPTER 1. CHRIST AND MORALITY

John Paul II begins his exposition with a spiritual-moral analysis of the encounter between Christ and the rich young man as narrated in Mt 19:16-22 (#6-24, pp.12-37). It constitutes an extraordinarily helpful example of a Catholic interpretation of the biblical text, with reference to the essentials of Catholic morality. Such an interpretation has been explained at length by the recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.11 Beginning with this particular rich young man’s encounter with Jesus (#7-8) as symbolizing our universal human search for the meaning of life and for salvation, the chapter goes on to sketch the unique role of Christ and that of His Church in this search (#9-10). This also indicates in a natural way the place of God’s 10 Words (Commandments) and Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, in all authentic Christian loving (#11-15). The chapter then takes up the inner human yearning for perfection (#16-18), together with Christ’s invitation to “Come, follow me” (#19-21).

Going beyond the Gospel narrative, the chapter then describes the response made possible by the Risen Christ’s continuing grace-filled presence in the individual believer, and specifically in the moral catechesis of the Church’s Tradition and living Magisterium (#22-27). It concludes by reaffirming Vatican II’s position on the task of the Magisterium as the authentic

interpreter of the word of God in whatever form (DV 8-10).

The most outstanding characteristic of VERSPL’s first chapter is that from start to finish, it is completely a faith approach, even in its discussion of the Natural Law. Such emphasis on an explicitly “faith view” has special significance for the Catholic moral education of Filipinos today. For the text perfectly exemplifies, within Faith’s moral dimension, just the type of Biblical catechesis called for by PCP II (art. 12-14).

In addition, a major question in contemporary moral theology has been whether there is a specifically “Christian Ethics.” A nuanced negative position is quite common, even among certain Catholic moralists. VERSPL never even considers the question. Instead, the essential role of Faith is strongly asserted in Christian morality in general (#26), in the indispensable action of the Lord’s grace in human freedom (#24), and especially in the central role of Christ and the Church in the daily moral activities of Christians.

Yet the encyclical acknowledges the need for serious, critical investigation and research on the part of today’s moralists, into the inter-relation between faith and moral life (#29, p. 48; #36, p. 58). But it prudently goes further in locating this prolonged debate on the relevance of Faith to moral conduct within our contemporary secularized world. In such a context the debate inescapably tends toward a certain rationalizing that is blind to some deeply rooted Faith-factors operative in actual Christian moral living.12

In the life of the ordinary adult Catholic Filipino, Christian Faith and reason are constantly being exercised, reflected upon, and lived out in daily moral living — both theoretically and practically. Contemporary Catholic Moral Theology rightfully stresses three basic levels in moral living. There is the deepest level of the basic human values/goods that we all seek and which form our fundamental moral vision, whether we ever consciously explicate it or not. Then there’s the second level of moral commandments and norms which guard and protect these deep-set human values in human society. Finally, there’s the third level of our specific,

individual moral acts and choices which make up our daily moral lives.

This three-stage sketch of moral life is helpful in picturing the essential structure of our moral activity. But due in part to the need to solve specific moral dilemmas, it seems to have led a good number of moral educators to focus almost completely on the reasoning process of discerning “what to do?” in specific cases. This focus is strongly supported by the behavioral sciences, which by their very nature have no place for “Faith realities” such as grace and sin. Hence the direct influence of Faith on morality has often been relegated to only the first level of a general “Christian vision.” No explicit Christian Faith input is recognized on the level of individual moral acts and decisions. VERSPL, by discussing in detail central topics such as the human person, human freedom, conscience, and natural law, brings out the essential role of Faith on all three levels of morality. The encyclical thus offers a salutary re-affirmation of the primacy of FAITH in Christian moral education.

CHAPTER 2. THE CHURCH AND TODAY’S MORAL THEOLOGY

This chapter contains the essential teaching of VERSPL. The text is admittedly difficult, not only because of the natural complexity of the matter discussed, but also because of its “spiral” form of argumentation which circles back and repeats former truths while developing new points.13 The chapter’s introduction (#28-34, pp. 46-56) begins with a summary of moral truths drawn from Scripture (#28, p. 46). It then proposes a definition of Moral Theology (#29, p. 47), while emphasizing its foundation in “sound teaching” of the Magisterium (#29-30, pp. 49-51). A final section introduces authentic human freedom and conscience, in opposing the abuse of making them autonomous and absolutely sovereign. Instead it describes the conjunction of genuine human freedom with moral obligation (#31-34, pp. 51-56). These points are all developed in greater detail in the various sections of the following pages.

13. Commentators have frequently remarked on this spiral form of argumentation that appears in a number of John Paul II’s letters.
FREEDOM AND LAW RELATED

The encyclical obviously wishes to relate our authentic human freedom with God’s morally binding law (#35-53, pp. 56-85). It does this by explaining how Catholic teaching traditionally pictured human reason as sharing in God’s eternal law. Thus in one move, VERSPL is able to ground both our rightful moral autonomy as human persons, as well as the origin and source of the moral law, in God Himself (#36-41).

Natural Law is explained according to the basic approach of St. Thomas, including its basis in God’s eternal law, its development in God’s revealed Law through Moses, and especially in the Spirit’s interior law as described in Jeremiah and further elucidated in the letters of St. Paul (#42-45, pp. 65-71).

In this section on freedom and nature the general question of artificial means of contraception is briefly raised. What VERSPL takes up specifically is the rejection by certain moralists of the “traditional arguments” against artificial contraception on the grounds of “physicalism” — using mere biological laws as moral laws, thus denying human rationality, freedom, and cultural conditioning. This allegedly ‘naturalistic’ understanding of the sexual act was, these moralists claim, the basis for condemning as morally unacceptable such acts as contraception, direct sterilization, autoeroticism, homosexual relations, etc. (#47, p. 74).

Against this view VERSPL re-affirms the intrinsic unity of the human person, body and soul. It is the human person, an embodied spirit, who is the subject of moral acts (#48, p. 76). Reasserting this intrinsic place of the human body in questions of natural law, leads to the encyclical’s own rejection of the term “merely physical” goods, often called “pre-moral” (#48-50, pp. 75-79). The terms “premoral,” “physical” or “ontic” are later rejected in the encyclical’s exposition of fundamental option (#65, p. 100) and of the moral approach of proportionalism (#75, p. 115). Such terms are commonly used by moralists who espouse the moral theory of proportionate reasoning.

But even here, the thrust of the encyclical is rather to stress the universality and immutability of the natural law as universal and permanent moral norms (#51-53, pp. 79-85). While the
moralists who use the rejected moral terms may rightfully claim they themselves have not fallen prey to the excesses refuted by the encyclical, the widespread confusion regarding objective moral laws remains a far more critical indictment of current moral theory than these moralists seem to realize. But whatever the more balanced evaluation may eventually be within the confines of professional moral theology, in terms of moral education there is a clear mandate to respond directly to the crisis accurately portrayed in VERSPL.

Today's Filipino religious educator can profit much from VERSPL's constant concern to bring out the Faith dimension in moral activity. This is needed in view of the overriding influence of modern empirical sciences on our moral attitudes and choices. We are so much influenced by the methods of scientific studies, built on statistically verifiable empirical data, that we begin to explain even our moral behavior exclusively in terms of measurable psycho-social processes (#46, p. 72). In the Philippines today, despite the religious devotionalism present in our cultural activities and even in the mass media, the social scientists have in many ways become the judges and proponents of the "new morality." The good or evil in our lives seem to be more and more explained uniquely in behaviorist terms (cf. also #111-12, pp. 166-68).

To recognize this situation is absolutely essential to any practical program for improving Catholic moral education in the Philippines. This assessment of the actual influence of the behavioral sciences on moral formation can be supported by a simple analysis of the "Value Education Program" of the Department of Education and Sports, and the Senate's "Moral Reform" project. Neither project has any place for the reality of sin among us, nor for our absolute need for God's liberating grace. Within the context of authentic Filipino religiosity, this 'secularist' approach to morality seems particularly out of place.14

VERSPL's insistence on the unity of the person, body and soul, in rejecting the common charge of "physicalism," is very Filipino. It also indicates to what an extent the controversy over

artificial contraception has dominated Catholic moral theologizing since *Humanae Vitae* (1968). The result has been the creation of a whole new radical re-evaluation of many traditional Catholic moral positions and terms. Much of this effort has been necessary, given the new moral problems constantly arising from new discoveries and realities. Moreover in this new moral research, certain exaggerations are to be expected. The tendency to separate the physical dimensions of the human person from our free spiritual moral activity seems to be an example of the latter.

This raises the question of the validity of typical popular categories among current moralists, namely “premoral” or “ontic” evil. Their origin can be traced back to the same concentrated effort by current moralists to elaborate a moral approach that can resolve the problem of artificial contraception. But for the moral educator, more important than any proposed solution to the contraception problem is the tendency to turn moral education into a study of crisis situations. The whole study of morality seems to be gradually reduced to how a person can come to a reasonable moral choice between two or more fundamental values which in the context cannot both be fostered. While all recognize the importance of developing the skills needed to make good Christian moral decisions, the exclusive focus on such skills/acts can constitute a denial of the deepest sacramental dimensions of moral life, reducing it to the instrumental or utilitarian.

The position of *VERSPL* can be interpreted positively as a serious effort to overcome the polarization that has unfortunately arisen among Catholic moralists from the newly elaborated moral positions. The tendency to play down the physical dimensions of our human acts corresponds to the legitimate desire to stress the free, intentional dimension, and the historicity natural to all our moral acts. Likewise shifting the focus from our individual moral acts to the deeper level of our fundamental option — not what I do, my acts, but who I am, my very person or self. Both these thrusts naturally support stressing the individual’s “proportionate reasoning” on premoral evil and its consequences, while avoiding facing squarely the “objectivity” essential to the very existence of any genuine human morality.
CONSCIENCE AND TRUTH

Some contemporary presentations of conscience are charged by VERSPL with overstressing the complexity of its functions and the moral conflicts it faces (#54-64, pp. 85-98). The individual person’s conscience becomes in practice either separated from, if not opposed to, the teaching of moral precepts (#55-56, pp. 86-88). Conscience is described in the encyclical as the application of the law to a particular case, or “a moral judgment about man and his actions” (#52, pp. 81-82; #59, pp. 90-91), or simply “the proximate norm of personal morality” (#60, p. 92).

What is particularly helpful for the moral educator is VERSPL’s insistence that “conscience thus Formulates moral obligation (#59, p. 91). It explains how “the practical judgment of conscience . . . imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act,” and that this manifests the link between freedom and truth” (#61, p. 93). The point which the encyclical wishes to stress is that “conscience expresses itself in acts of ‘judgment’ not in arbitrary ‘decisions’” (#55, p. 87; #61, p. 93).

Clearly this is one of the encyclical’s most relevant sections to moral education in the Philippines. Each of the major characteristics of conscience explained by VERSPL can serve to correct some of the most common misunderstandings prevalent among Filipino youth today. Professional moral theologians may truthfully disclaim having taught the notions of conscience criticized by the encyclical. But anyone experienced in religious and moral education can testify to the accuracy of the misconceptions about conscience raised in VERSPL. Frankly, it seems probable that the current moralists’ stress on the moral agent unintentionally supports some of these misconceptions.

A number of points in the encyclical’s teaching on conscience are particularly pertinent to our moral education. First is its descriptive definition that focuses on what conscience alone does, namely, apply a universal moral norm to a concrete act/situation. No law, not even God’s law, “applies itself”; and conscience never claims to be a “law unto itself.” It always uses an objective norm as the basis for its judgment.

Concretely, this straight-forward description of conscience can effect a much needed simplification and clarity in moral educa-
tion. For many contemporary moralists — again in their pursuit of a satisfactory moral solution to the contraception problem — proposed a rather complicated three level description of conscience which unnecessarily obscured the essential interaction of conscience and moral law. What conscience does, and only conscience does, was lost in the effort to solve subsequent specific difficulties in the exercise of conscience. VERSPL offers substantial help in restoring a proper perspective of conscience in moral education.

Second, in explaining how the practical judgment of conscience imposes a moral obligation on the person to act, VERSPL joins inextricably authentic personal freedom with moral obligation. The innumerable ways proposed in current educational theory of avoiding any mention of moral obligation that holds free persons morally obliged precisely in their free acts, constitutes perhaps the most serious error faced by the moral educator today. Even the more acceptable term of “responsibility” has often proven to mean for the youthful students “responsibility to oneself,” again completely evading any moral duty or obligation. Despite all the erudite explanations of current moralists concerning authentic human freedom, the real, actual unthematized grasp of freedom for most is clearly “doing what I want.”

Third, “erroneous conscience,” both culpable and non-culpable, as explained in VERSPL, brings out the “objective dimension” of our personal consciences. It also helps to ward off the tendency of the more pious to simply identify conscience directly with the voice of God.

Finally, the encyclical’s stress on the formation of a Christian conscience and the Gospel call for continuous conversion can help the Christian moral educator to bring out the indispensable role in moral living of virtues and character formation in the following of Christ (cf. #64, p. 97).

FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE AND SPECIFIC KINDS OF BEHAVIOR

The notion of “fundamental option,” as proposed by various current moralists, is taken up by VERSPL (#65-70, pp. 98-108). The main point of the encyclical here is to forcefully reject the separation of fundamental option from individual deliberate
moral acts (#65-67, pp. 100-3). In integrating "fundamental choice" with conscious free decisions, the encyclical also refutes the claim that moral good/evil apply only to the transcendental dimension of fundamental option, while particular choices can only be right/wrong. Also rejected is the claim that a single act cannot be a mortal sin (#70, pp. 106-8) These rejections come together in rejecting the theory that there are two levels of morality: (i) the order of good/evil, and (ii) specific acts qualified as morally "right/wrong" by proportionate reasoning on the "premoral" or "physical" goods (#65, pp. 99-100). Positively, VERSPL relates fundamental option to what the Bible speaks of as particular fundamental decisions of faith, and to the obedience of faith (#66-68, pp. 100-5).

The position of VERSPL on fundamental option can be greatly strengthened by referring to one of the originators of the concept, Gabriel Marcel. This Catholic existentialist philosopher is famous for the distinction between "I have freedom," meaning the capacity to choose, and "I am freedom," meaning my "self" gradually formed through my free choices. In Marcel, fundamental option is a metaphysical rather than a psychological concept, as described in VERSPL. It simply means our moral self as it gradually develops through specific moral experiences.15

But in some current moral theologies, the notion of fundamental option/freedom was used precisely as part of a drive against so-called moralistic "act accounting." Thus instead of bringing out the inter-relation between our fundamental freedom and our individual free acts, their distinction was stressed. Personal 'being' (who I am) was contrasted with my merely 'doing' (what I do). This unfortunately led to separating fundamental freedom from individual free acts. Only the one-way relationship of the fundamental option determining the individual moral acts was taken into view. No explanation of how the fundamental option itself came into being was proposed.

Again Filipino religious educators and moralists are given an excellent opportunity by VERSPL to become more alert to such

one-sided presentations. A column in a Manila newspaper brought out sharply the grave moral error that resulted from inadequate presentation and/or understanding of fundamental option as proposed in some current moral theologies. In brief, the adult in question had been taught that individual moral acts such as adulterous acts were not important as long as one’s fundamental option to Christ remained constant. The newspaper columnist attributed the source of this notion to a ‘modern’ priest who undoubtedly had been schooled in one of the current moral theologies.16

But once again, it would be a mistake to think the leading moral theologians fall into such crude errors. What is at issue here, however, is the effect of their teaching as it becomes watered-down by college student, seminarian, or simply any adult Catholic Filipino layman and woman.

THE MORAL ACT

VERSPL begins this whole section (#72-83, pp. 108-27) by re-asserting the “essential connection between the moral value of an act and man’s final end” (#72, p. 110), and the “essential ‘teleological’ character of moral life” (#73, p. 112). Only then does the encyclical take up current ‘teleological’ moral theories of proportionalism and consequentialism, in what is the most difficult part of the whole encyclical (#74 ff.).” VERSPL’s first step is to praise the effort to find ever more consistent rational arguments for moral life as “legitimate and necessary” (#74, p. 113). But it immediately cautions that inadequate understanding of the “object of moral action” leads to false solutions, called in the text “consequentialism” and “proportionalism.”17 Both theories are said to reject the possibility of absolute moral

17. VERSPL defines consequentialism as drawing “the criteria of the rightness of a given way of acting solely from a calculation of foreseeable consequences deriving from a given choice.” Proportionalism is described as: “by weighing the various values and goods being sought, [it] focuses on the proportion acknowledged between the good and bad effects of that choice with a view to the ‘greater good’ or ‘lesser evil’ “ (#75, pp. 114-15).
prohibitions, and to concentrate on calculating the foreseeable consequences of premoral, physical realities. They hold that goodness is always mixed with evil, so morality becomes an activity of proportionate reasoning.

VERSPL rejects both theories as not faithful to the Church’s teaching IF and “when they believe they can justify, as morally good, deliberate choices of kinds of behavior contrary to the commandments of divine and natural law” (#76, p. 117). The encyclical repeats this rejection in asserting that “one must reject the thesis, characteristic of teleological and proportionist theories, which holds that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species — its ‘object’ — the deliberate choice of certain kinds of moral behavior or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned” (#79, p. 121; repeated #82, p. 125).

The encyclical repeatedly stresses that “the primary and decisive element for moral judgment is the OBJECT of the human act (#79, p. 121). Thus the intention and the circumstances of the act, while capable of lessening the gravity of an evil act, nonetheless cannot alter its moral species” (#77, pp. 118-19). 18 The aim of VERSPL is clearly to insist that “there are certain specific kinds of behavior that are always wrong to choose” (#78, p. 120), that is, acts that are “intrinsically evil” (#80, p. 122), independent of intention and circumstances. 19

The encyclical is most open to criticism in this section since it enters into the tedious distinctions of the many different current moral theologies. Many see the effort as an attempt to do the impossible, namely, to accurately present and evaluate all the intricacies of the different moral theories alluded to. Thus the encyclical unfortunately lends itself to being discounted as grave “misrepresentation” by the very moralists who could hopefully

18. This critique repeats The Catechism of the Catholic Church, (French ed.) #1754: “Les circonstances ne peuvent de soi modifier la qualité morale des actes eux-mêmes.”
19. Examples of such acts are listed in #80, p. 123, quoting Vatican II, GS #27: homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide, mutilation, physical and mental torture, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution.
profit the most from re-evaluating their theories.

But a critical reading of the text seems to indicate that essential circumstances and intention are included in what the encyclical terms the “object” of the act, even though such is not explicitly recognized. The strongest evidence for this is the assertion that “In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person” (italics in original) (#78, p. 119). Therefore when the encyclical speaks of “intention,” it must refer to a “second intention,” beyond the basic minimum necessary to have a moral act.

This interpretation is confirmed by a following number which states that “intrinsically evil acts are such always and per se, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances (#80, p. 122). Such also seems to be the meaning of “deliberate choice” in the excerpt cited above (#79, p. 121). Surely “the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behavior” includes an “intention.” It would also seem to necessarily include the situation where the “circumstances” were traditionally said to change the moral species of an act, for example, a soldier shooting at and killing an enemy soldier in war. These “circumstances” were said to change the moral act from murder to possible heroism. In VERSPL such circumstances would be part of the “object,” namely, “the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person” (#79, p. 120).

This is a key point in responding to much legitimate criticism of VERSPL, and toward reconciling its substantial position with that of many contemporary Catholic moral theologians.

But perhaps for the religious educator, this section of the encyclical is more valuable for its questioning the basic attitude of mind behind “proportionate reasoning.” The encyclical repeats the objection that has often been raised — and allegedly answered — regarding the “difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of evaluating all the good and evil consequences and effects — defined as pre-moral — of one’s own acts; an exhaustive rational calculation is not possible (#77, p. 119). The encyclical’s rejection of this “calculating” process is confirmed in ordinary human
experience by the universal temptation of “rationalizing.” Current “proportionalists” seem to give but slight acknowledgement to this most common human failing. VERSPL seems to be on far firmer ground here.

It must be openly acknowledged, however, that the encyclical does not supply any direct answer to the problematic situation that gave rise to proportionalism, namely, the use of artificial means of contraception. The challenge remains on how the Church’s moral teaching on sexuality can be presented in more intelligible ways to ordinary Catholic lay men and women. To put it bluntly, no current moral theology up to now seems to have succeeded in this task. In spite of all its finely spun reasoning, proportionalism must face perhaps its most telling objection in the simple, practical judgment: “it hasn’t worked!”

CHAPTER 3. MORAL GOOD FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH/WORLD

VERSPL’s final chapter (pp. 128-74) returns to the explicit Faith view of human freedom based on truth, stressing sharing the munus regale of the Crucified Christ (#84-87, pp. 128-34), and the unity of faith and morality (#88-89, pp. 134-37). Once again the universality and immutability of moral norms are stressed, but this time precisely as serving “to protect the personal dignity and inviolability of man, on whose face is reflected the splendor of God” (#90, p. 137). Consequentialism and proportionalism are again judged “unacceptable” in their rejection of negative moral norms, valid without exception, regarding specific kinds of behavior. The existence of such norms are said to be confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom and the holiness of the Church (#92-94, pp. 140-43).

Such universal and unchanging moral norms are then related to the “service of the person and society” (#95-97, pp. 143-47).

20. At least one moral theologian strongly criticized citing martyrdom in this context. Apparently some have lost sight not only of the traditional Catholic appeal to saints and martyrs in appraising the following of Christ, but even the judgment of the civil courts, e.g., at Nuremberg on the moral obligation, binding even under threat of death, not to carry out orders for gravely immoral acts such as mass murder.
and applied to economic, social, and political life (#98-101, pp. 147-52). The great difficulty for most in respecting the norm of morality, and the continual human temptation to break the harmony between freedom and truth, are recognized (#102, pp. 152 f.). Nevertheless, the encyclical confidently asserts that with the grace of the Lord, "temptations can be overcome, sins can be avoided." Thus what is unacceptable is "the attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified" (#104, p. 155). The Gospel parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14) is immediately taken up to further illustrate the point, and to avoid any misunderstanding that the text is proposing a new type of Pharisaism (#104, p. 156).

Morality and the "new evangelization" are related in the next section (#106-8, pp. 157-61), which then discusses the "service of the moral theologian," including the normative dimension of the Church's morality as irreducible to the results of the so-called behavioral sciences (#109-13, pp. 162-69). The sensitive topic of dissent is touched on briefly. Dissent "in the form of carefully orchestrated protests and polemics carried on in the media" is judged to be "opposed to ecclesial communion and correct understanding of the hierarchical constitution of the People of God" and therefore "unacceptable" (#113, p. 169).

The chapter's final sections take up the responsibilites of Bishops as heralds and authentic teachers of the Faith (#114-17, pp. 169-74), including a brief summary of the main contents of the encyclical (#115, p. 171). VERSPL concludes with five pages on "Mary, Mother of Mercy," "model of all who hear the word of God and keep it" (#118-20, pp. 175-79).

Some of the negative reactions to the encyclical focus on this final chapter as unnecessarily authoritarian and judgmental. But if read carefully together with the first two chapters, a more positive interpretation can be achieved. A Manila newspaper published an editorial comment on the encyclical by a well known priest-social scientist with the headline: "not a call for a witchhunt." The column praised the encyclical as a corrective to "the fuzzy thinking" of those who take the community's decision to be the sole moral norm, and as a "call to a moral seriousness and
respect for truth, qualities desperately needed in our time."  

For Christian moral educators in the Philippines, this editorial comment in a Manila paper holds particular interest not only because it is by a leading Philippine social scientist, which indicates the relevance of VERSPL for our social situation. More important is the comment’s major point of rejecting the relativism of “common opinion” and praising VERSPL for providing an intellectual basis for objective morality. Three days later, the same newspaper ran a comment by another author on the priest-social scientist’s column on VERSPL. While explicitly rejecting “morality is relative,” the author opted precisely for “whatever anyone ‘feels’ is right,” equivalently a perfect relativism.  

This public, local exchange of opinion could be taken as rather typical of how even well-educated Filipino Catholics “rationalize” in their moral lives. It would tend to support VERSPL’s position against “proportionalism.” For even when an objective moral error is presented clearly, an educated writer, though obviously recognizing the point and the imminent danger of sheer moral relativism, chooses to simply follow his own preferences. The position of VERSPL against “proportionate reasoning” is also supported by a growing number of ethical studies that seriously question the alleged over-emphasis on reasoning processes in moral life. These studies wish to bring out something as traditional as Aristotle’s Ethica, namely, the role of moral virtues and character in moral living.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Our aim in concentrating on the positive values of the encyclical for moral education in the Philippines can be said to

23. See the works of Stanley Hauerwas who developed this character approach to moral education. Not surprisingly he has high praise for VERSPL (cf. Commonweal, Oct. 22, 1993). Two recent books that relativize the place of “calculating” in moral living are Mark Johnson, Moral Imagination (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1992), and James Q. Wilson, Moral Sense (New York: Free Press, 1993).
correspond in general to the basic goal proposed by the Pope’s own public introductory announcement of the encyclical (Sunday Angelus, 3 Oct. 1993). The Pope hoped that “when the text is read as a whole, it will be the object of calm consideration, and will thus be able to contribute to a better understanding of the demanding and liberating Gospel message.”

The chief positive values of VERSPL for moral educators in the Philippines that have been discussed in this study may be summarized as follows. First, the basic Christic approach to Christian morality, grounded in the truth that faith is inextricably involved in morality from start to finish, on all levels (#37, 88). Second, explaining genuine human freedom and autonomy not as absolutes but as relative to our common human condition, as we stand in relation before others, and the Absolute Other, God our Creator (#32-34, 38-41). Third, stressing the intrinsic link between our fundamental option and our individual concrete moral acts (#65-67), thus rehabilitating the importance of our individual moral acts, and their good/evil character, not merely right/wrong. Fourth, the insistence on universal objective [natural] moral law, grounding objective morality (#51-53, 95-97).

Fifth, insisting on the full integrity of the human person as embodied spirit, thus rehabilitating the importance of the human body as intrinsic to human moral life (#47-50). Sixth, defining conscience as the faculty which applies objective moral law to our concrete acts and imposes a moral obligation, thus rejecting all self-centered subjectivism (#59-62). Seventh, relativizing the current over-emphasis on “complexity” and “crisis situations” which tended to reduce moral life to the individual’s calculating proficiency. Finally, clarifying the weaknesses of “proportionate reasoning” and the use of “pre-moral” or “ontic” evil in solving moral problems.

But perhaps the more important conclusion from this study is that VERSPL seems to be calling for new initiatives that can set aside the polemics of the last twenty-five years and the polarized moral positions that have resulted. In terms of actual Christian living, VERSPL’s “Faith approach” probably speaks to

the ordinary Filipino Catholic more effectively than most of the current moral positions criticized. It would be a serious mistake, then, to reduce the present tension to a conflict between up-to-date, forward-looking moral theologians, and a recalcitrant, out-of-date Vatican. What is clear, at least from the perspective of the Christian moral educator, is the challenge VERSPL holds out to all Catholics: a total, personal following of Christ, guided and supported in the Christian community, the Church, in the truth of moral goodness, through the grace and Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ.