In 1993, Pope John Paul II promulgated his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth). At the heart of this encyclical was the need to address what can accurately be described as an ethical methodological schism within Catholic moral theology. The schism is between two schools of thought, the Basic Goods Theory (BGT) and Proportionalism or Revisionism. The Basic Goods Theory has developed what could be described as an apologetical ethical method defending the absolute norms of the magisterium, especially in the areas of sexual and biomedical ethics. Revisionism challenges many of these absolute teachings on the basis of, among other considerations, the teleological principle of proportionate reason for determining right or wrong acts. While the focus of debates between these two schools is frequently on the existence, meaning, and nature of moral absolutes, there is a fundamental difference as well on the nature of the relationship between the noninfallible moral norms taught by the magisterium and the formation of conscience. This difference raises the question: Must the properly informed Catholic conscience intellectually assent to every noninfallible teaching of the magisterium, or is there room for faithful dissent from such teachings on the basis of the authority of conscience? How does each ethical theory understand the nature of the relationship between the formation of conscience and the magisterium?

Before exploring these questions, two comments are in order. First, while the Christian tradition has consistently taught the primacy of conscience, it has also taught that conscience is not purely autonomous. That is, conscience does not create the values that shape, form, and inform it; this is the relativism and subjectivism that *Veritatis Splendor* rightly condemns. Rather, the formation of conscience entails discerning the objective values of divine law through Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In the case of magisterial teaching, it should be clear from the outset that the nature of this relationship is not either/or, i.e., either conscience or magisterium, but rather, both/and. The difference lies in which dimension is emphasized in each theory. Second, Catholic tradition itself is ambiguous on defining the nature of this relationship; depending on which magisterial documents one consults, one can find justification for two very different models on the nature of this relationship. Since there are diverse definitions of the nature of this relationship, we will begin...
with a succinct, if not altogether clear, definition of this relationship from Canon Law: "A religious respect (religiosum obsequium) of intellect and will, even if not the assent of faith, is to be paid to the teaching which the Supreme Pontiff or the college of bishops enunciate on faith or morals when they exercise the authentic magisterium even if they do not intend to proclaim it with a definitive act; therefore the Christian faithful are to take care to avoid whatever is not in harmony with that teaching" (Coriden, c. 752). A central point of debate between the BGT and revisionism is the meaning and nature of the Latin term obsequium. What does it mean for the faithful to give obsequium to noninfallible magisterial moral teachings in the formation of conscience?

The BGT interprets obsequium as assent and submission (Grisez, 1993, 46, n. 90). Religious assent is defined as "reasonable submission to the Church's teachers" (Grisez, 1993, 47). What does the BGT mean by reasonable submission? One accepts a teaching on the authority of the pope or bishops "even if one would think it untrue except for [their] teaching" (Grisez, 1993, 47). This seems to give extraordinary authority to the magisterium, even when it is not teaching infallibly. However, the BGT reasons syllogistically that this is a reasonable response to noninfallible teaching on two counts. First, "religious assent is rooted in divine faith" (Grisez, 1993, 48). That is, the foundation for religious assent is the fact that God, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has given the pope and bishops their teaching role, which itself is a truth of faith. Second, teachings which call for religious assent are drawn partly from truths of faith (Grisez, 1993, 48). As such, the faithful should assent to those teachings regardless of any personal or communal arguments that may challenge the reasonableness of those teachings. In this way, the BGT takes an absolutist stand on the nature of the relationship between conscience and the magisterium, which is reflected in statements elsewhere: "For her members, the Catholic Church is the supreme moral authority under God. Catholics ought to conform their consciences to her teaching in every question, every detail, every respect. If they are faithful, they will" (Grisez, 1983, 566). Or again, "A Catholic conscience should conform absolutely to the Church's teaching" (Grisez, 1983, 666). To form one's conscience according to the BGT, then, requires religious assent or obedience to noninfallible moral teachings when the pope or bishops act in their official capacity as teachers of faith or morals.

The late Richard McCormick, as well as many other revisionists, endorse renowned ecclesiologist Francis Sullivan's understanding of obsequium, though not necessarily his literal interpretation of the term. Sullivan argues that, in Latin, the term must be interpreted as submission, whereas many revisionists would interpret it as respect. Regardless of which interpretation one espouses, however, it "should not be translated simply as 'assent'" (Sullivan, 23). Why not? Because assent implies an either/or proposition; either one assents to the proposition or one does not. Respect, however, denotes an attitude, which entails "a basic respect for the authority of the magisterium, and an openness to its teaching" (Sullivan, 24).

Concretely, what does this mean for Catholics and the formation of conscience? It means that there is a presumption of truth in favor of magisterial teachings, and that Catholics should strive to convince themselves of the truth of a particular teaching. This requires that they know and understand those teachings, the theology, science, and experience supporting them, and the values which the teachings...
express and are trying to protect; this process should be fulfilled in a spirit of prayer and discernment seeking to know and deepen their understanding of divine law. When the faithful fulfill these requirements, however, if they conclude that they cannot intellectually assent to a particular teaching, they can faithfully dissent from this teaching while, at the same time, respecting the teaching authority of the magisterium. In this process, they have fulfilled their obligation of obsequium toward the magisterium and her teaching.

From the BGT and Revisionism, two distinct models of the relationship between the formation of conscience and magisterium emerge. The BGT defends a largely authoritarian and hierarchical parent-child model. Like the parent who teaches a child and yet, when that child resists or questions that teaching, utilizes his or her authority to ensure obedience, so too, the magisterium. While encouraging the faithful to understand and integrate her teachings, in the case where there are serious doubts regarding a teaching, the magisterium relies upon her authority exercised through power and ecclesial censure to instill obedience (Grisez, 1986). According to this model, there is little or no room for faithful dissent. Rather, the syllogistic reasoning of the relationship between conscience and magisterium in this model could be stated as follows:

**Major Premise:** A well-informed conscience has supreme authority;

**Minor Premise:** A conscience is well-informed when it religiously assents to the teachings of the magisterium on faith and morals.

**Conclusion:** The magisterium has supreme authority on faith and morals.

Within this model, there is no meaningful or practical distinction between infallible and non-infallible magisterial teachings when it comes to the faithful’s responsibility to religiously assent to those teachings.

The Revisionist model of the relationship between conscience and noninfallible moral teachings can be labeled the responsible-dialogical model. Within this model the magisterium and conscience have unique perceptions of themselves and their relationship to one another. First of all, the magisterium recognizes its authority guaranteed in and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This authority, however, is neither static nor absolute. It is not static because it recognizes the tradition of the church as a living tradition and, consequently, its understanding of truth is an evolving notion. As a pilgrim church we are on a journey towards truth. And though guided by the Holy Spirit, this journey takes place only in and through finite servants, including those who occupy magisterial offices. As noted by Ladislas Orsy, this is a paradox within the church: “It is endowed with divine gifts and it is subject to human limitations” (397). Consequently, the magisterium is constantly in need of discovering and communicating the moral truths of divine law in light of “the signs of the times,” which is often influenced by culture and history. It carries on this search in dialogue with pastors, theologians, the sensus fidelium, the discoveries of science, and the changing experiences of the church in order to best communicate the contents of divine law. Unless a teaching is clearly established to be infallibly defined (Coriden, c. 749, par. 3), the magisterium is commissioned with the ongoing discernment and articulation of moral truth; that discernment is sometimes more of a meandering rather than a straight line, however.

Within the responsible-dialogical model conscience has a unique function as well. The presumption is that the conscience is
not like a child in relation to the parental magisterium. Rather, the adult conscience seeks moral truth and, with deep admiration and respect, consults the magisterium as a trusted friend and guide. Like any mature adult relationship there is a mutual respect between the two. While the presumption of truth is in favor of the magisterium and its teachings, there is still the possibility for questioning, a mutual dialogical and dialectical search for truth and, even in some cases, disagreement that does not destroy the relationship itself but instead provides the challenge and possibility of growth for both. While the Catholic conscience must give religious respect to non-infallible teachings, there are other sources of moral knowledge for the formation of conscience which may occasionally come into conflict with those teachings. In such a case, one must presume in favor of the magisterium unless there is overwhelming theological or scientific evidence, or a virtually-unanimous sense of the faithful (sensus fidelium), which challenges those teachings. When such challenges develop, then dialogue must ensue so that all the faithful—hierarchy, theologians, and laity alike—may come to a deeper understanding of the issues, and discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This dialogue must proceed under a spirit of Gospel charity that binds the community of believers.

Both models have functioned throughout the history of the church and are justified in its tradition. Vatican II’s “signs of the times” communion ecclesiology, however, in which the Spirit of God “distributes” grace among the faithful of every rank to make them fit “for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church” (Lumen Gentium, n. 12) suggests a responsible-dialogical model over a hierarchical and authoritarian parent-child model for the relationship between the formation of conscience and magisterial teaching.

References


