

Imitation in Contemporary Catholic Moral Theology

An abstract presented by Tyler Graham for COV&R 2010: Notre Dame

Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* is heralded by many as his best. It is an attempt to clarify reasons for understanding the Church's teaching on intrinsically evil acts. Moreover, it seeks to show the problems in some of the major trends of contemporary moral theology (mostly post-conciliar) that seem to go against the core of Catholic moral pedagogy.

However, even a cursory glance at the outline of the encyclical reveals that John Paul's approach to this problem is not simply straightforward "Aquinas against German idealism" or "Thomism against proportionalism, teleologism, relativism, and subjectivism" (though the middle section of the encyclical could be couched as such). Rather, the Pope frames his argument with an opening and closing section that unfolds the radically mimetic and martyred quality of Christian existence. It is here, then, that the Girardian should be alerted.

On the one hand, the Pope is trying to show that human freedom cannot be divorced from the splendor of the truth, which ultimately means the truth of the dignity of the human person along with the necessity of primary precepts of the natural moral law protecting the fundamental good of the human person.

On the other hand, he ends up showing that freedom can also not ultimately be divorced from imitation! Or, more precisely, the fullness of the law is imitation of Christ. This move does not seem to be explored significantly by the scholars that I have explored, yet, it can be shown that the Pope puts a high value on the concept. In other words, mimetic desire seems to be exalted as a primary element in the discussions of contemporary moral theology. As a result, the opening to Girard's *I See Satan* (published only 8 years after the encyclical), takes on a new dimension. Moreover, in reflecting on martyrdom as the fullest expression of *imitatio Christi*, the Pope opens the door to a moral theological conversation with the whole scapegoat anthropology of Girard (and not merely the mimetic desire tenets).

My paper attempts to reiterate some claims that I made previously in 2006 on this topic and bring them up to date in light of a recent article from Paul Griffiths as well as two subsequent encyclicals, *Evangelium vitae* and *Spe salvi*. Moreover, I will try to push further the importance of holding Thomistic principles in hand to see where John Paul is going with his encyclical and ask where an Aquinas/Girard dialogue might be relevant in this area of thought.

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