

*Veritatis Splendor*: Another Girardian Look  
By Tyler Graham

## Introduction

Is there a link between the mimetic theory and moral philosophy (or even theology)? This is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, Girard certainly challenges us, somewhat like a Christian existentialist, to have an “authenticity” in our lives so that the desires we live by are not clouded in the deceit and violence so easily triggered by rivalries (or “conflictual mimesis”). But even this moral code of mimesis does not really allow for any major addition to moral philosophy: the study of human acts (i.e., movements of the will toward that which the intellect holds forth as good). Girard is the student of self-deception and self-discovery. Thus, if Girard’s work is mostly a study of desire and its effects on knowledge, it is not really that helpful in shedding new light on human acts freely and consciously chosen. Rather, like Freud before him, Girard is very much a pioneer of that which lies beneath the conscious mind.

On the other hand, Girard’s 2001 opening chapter in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* may still be somewhat underappreciated in its novelty and daring. In that chapter, Girard tries to reduce all of the commandments to mimetic desire. The final commandment, he argues, is against coveting, and, if broken, leads one down the path of the other sins against the second half of the Decalogue. Thus, the mimetic theory might be at the very heart and soul of morality itself!

Yet, a careful inspection of the language of Girard’s opening commentary on the tenth commandment shows that there may be some need for further distinction and clarification in his use of words ‘covet’ and ‘desire.’ Let us compare his explanation to that of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Girard explains that “the tenth and last commandment is distinguished from those preceding it both by its length and its object: in place of prohibiting an *act* it forbids a *desire* . . . The verb ‘covet’ suggests that an uncommon desire is prohibited” (ISSFLL 7). In this last point, he suggests that we should not read the word ‘covet’ as an unusual desire but rather as the most universal of human desires: mimetic desire.

How does the Church understand the tenth commandment? The Catechism states that “the sensitive appetite leads us to desire pleasant things we do not have, e.g., the desire to eat when we are hungry or to warm ourselves when we are cold. These desires are good in themselves; but often they exceed the limits of reason and drive us to covet unjustly what is not ours and belongs to another or is owed to him (CCC 2535). Moreover, “it is not a violation of this commandment to desire to obtain things that belong to one’s neighbor, provided this is done by just means” (CCC 2537). Thus, the Church holds forth at least three levels of desire: natural appetite, normal desire for another’s goods, and “unreasonable” or “unjust” desire for the other’s goods.

Finally, the Catechism states that “envy represents a form of sadness and therefore a

refusal of charity; the baptized person should struggle against it by exercising good will” (CCC 2540). Thus, the movement of mimetic desire can be trained or perverted by acts of the will. There certainly is a prohibition of desire in the tenth commandment; however, the Church does not remove the role of moral act from the life of the soul seeking to follow the Decalogue. Rather it is in good will acts and cultivation of acts born from moderate desires for another’s goods that lead to the happy life. Finally, although mimetic desire is universal, the Catechism doesn’t allow that coveting is a universal desire, “natural” to man in the prelapsarian sense. The baptized person can break free of “excessive” desire in this area.

Thus, what we face in Girard’s treatment of the commandments is an attempt to “force the issue.” Where do desire and act come together in living a life free of the tenth commandment’s harrowing warning? What is the role of mimesis in leading good (rational, just) desire to the bad? Or, more precisely, when does good mimetic desire become bad and why? It is in this light that we can begin to look at the links between mimetic theory and moral philosophy (theology).

It was my contention about four years ago that the encyclical *Veritatis splendor* provided an opening for this dialogue between Girard and Catholic moral theology. I presented a paper at a conference entitled, “The Philosophical Legacy of Karol Wojtyla” that developed some of these links (see Graham 2008). Today I wish to revisit some of the common elements between Pope John Paul II’s thought and Girard’s while addressing a few key texts that have arisen since then and are relevant to the theme. I conclude with some brushstroke propositions about the position of Thomism in this dialogue for reasons that should be made clear as the essay unfolds.

What I would like to ask and explore then is the following question: Can the work of René Girard help develop these principles and show more connections within the framework laid out by John Paul II? I will answer this question in the affirmative with a brief overview of the development of his idea of “mimetic desire” and then try to show how this concept is at least implicitly referenced in the Pope’s meditation on the rich young man. Following this analysis, I will try to show how Girard’s model helps unfold the connection between law and imitation that John Paul seems to be drawing out of the tradition of the Church’s moral teaching. Finally, I will offer a look at Paul Griffiths’ article in *First Things* as well as a more recent encyclical, Benedict XVI’s *Spe salvi* to suggest some directions in which the dialogue may go in the future. These two explorations attempt to “test” the arguments made here.

## The Encyclical

The background of *Veritatis Splendor* is more or less spelled out in its own introduction. The Pope sees the work as necessitated by the various currents of dissent with the Church herself about some fundamental teachings of moral theology. In particular, he notes that some theologians have brought into question the universal and intractable quality of the first negative precepts of the natural moral law (a.k.a. the Ten Commandments or Decalogue).

The Pope offers, moreover, that the encyclical will attempt to respond to the Second Vatican Council's call to develop theology with the Bible, Patristics, the life of virtue and so forth. Meanwhile, he explains that the publishing year (1993) is intrinsically connected with the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The argument of *Veritatis splendor* is composed of three main parts. In the first part, the Pope presents a moving exegesis of Jesus' dialogue with the rich young man (recounted in Matthew's Gospel), and, through this Bible study, he offers several key principles of the moral life: God is the primary good, the call to perfection leads to Christ, and the commandments bind everywhere and always.

Then, in the second part of the encyclical, he counters four general trends of modern thought, all of which seem dangerously to lead people away from accepting the permanent binding quality of the Decalogue. Whether the opposing view argues for a "fundamental option" divorced from particular acts, a good intention that reduces the evil of acts, or a proportionalism that reevaluates circumstances to undo the evil of acts, the Pope shows that no theology is effective if it ends up justifying violations of the Ten Commandments. It could be argued that the heart of the moral teaching of the encyclical is in this part.

The final and third part, then, is a great call to martyrdom, and it situates this noble calling in the light of fundamental Christian moral living. John Paul II explains that the martyrs are outstanding witnesses to the fact that faith in Christ must come with morally good acts, and, at times, these acts must be sacrifices to avoid breaking any one of the Commandments. Martyrdom ultimately reveals that life in Christ always should trump mortal sin.

This encyclical certainly flows from the heart of the Church's desire to speak to modern man in his worldview and way of thinking (see *Gaudium et spes* 2), for, though the Church has never abrogated the natural moral law, the modern person often cannot see how the natural moral law binds universally everyone in every circumstance and particular act. Modernity tends to believe, rather, in a false view of the "freedom of choice," wherein we get to choose what is good or bad, right or wrong in any situation without reference to any binding universal normative law. And, as the Pope notes, Catholic moral theologians have not always been immune to the seductions of these philosophies.

Thus, we are wise to look at another subtext of the encyclical which is, in effect, a call to moral theologians to get the true "Spirit of Vatican II": make the doctrine understandable to the modern world! This is why a look at Girard can be fruitful in "unpacking" the deeper nuances of the encyclical. Let it be kept in mind that Pope John Paul II was a poet and dramatist among all his many other "hats." There are literary nuances in this encyclical that make it much more than just a "hey, obey the commandments" piece. He is trying to synthesize elements of the life of the Church that make the work of Girard particularly relevant to its exegesis.

## Some Premises of Girard's Mimetic Theory

Let us consider an overview of some key Girardian premises. For Girard, the starting point is an unambiguous claim about human desire: "we tend to desire what our neighbor has or what our neighbor desires" (Girard, 2001:8). In using the word "we" in this sentence he suggests a universal human condition.

However, to say that people imitate each other – or even their desires – cannot be seen as a new discovery in the philosophical or anthropological world. In fact, Girard is the first to show that the reason he first chose the word "mimesis" is because some of his insights are already there in, say, Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle writes that man is the most *mimetic* of the animals (*Poetics*, I:4), and from this principle he seems to "rehabilitate" tragedy from its denunciation by the Platonists, who, apparently, were eager to expel the poets (see Plato's *Republic X*).

If there is anything new from Girard in relation to this Aristotelian insight, though, it is based on watching the literary greats take mimetic desire to its most vivid conclusions. When we desire what others desire, we can go in two basic directions: toward the good or toward conflict. On the one hand, a young child can consistently imitate the desires of his parents and learn language, culture, and all sorts of specific modes and habits that are based on their role modeling. Mama and Papa go to the theater and enjoy it; little Johnny eventually "discovers" that he, too, likes doing that. And so on.

Of course, when it comes to peers, the situation can go in the other direction. What happens when two friends, who share the same desires in all of their recreational activities, start romantically desiring the same other person? This situation, so common in literature (almost every Shakespeare play!), is the easy road to conflict. Obviously, the challenges of morality and growth and virtue begin here (as they did for Cain, Joseph's brothers, and so on). One must resist the temptation to hatred and violence toward the peer who has now become a rival.

While this moral task of virtue is important to Girard, he is primarily interested in showing that one and the same form of human desire can generate growth and happiness as well as conflict and (if unattended or unchecked) violence and death.

In sum, then, the "breakthrough" formulation for Girard is that, when two people imitate each other's desires for an object that cannot be shared, and they do not work to curb or check (or even pray for deliverance), then the road to "mimetic rivalry" is opened to them. Again, this is the stuff of tragedy, and it seems to have a pervasive character in the great works of world literature. Girard followed the lead of his literary forebears and tried to formalize their insights into a literary theory that became a "new Freud," a new theory of desire in general.

A Mimetic Analysis of *Veritatis Splendor*

In John Paul II's encyclical, we see elements of this vision of imitative human desire. John Paul seems to stress in no uncertain terms that Christian fulfillment is unambiguously rooted in the imitation of Christ. Let us turn to his precise wording on the topic. The Pope explains that following Christ, which is the "essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality, . . . is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves *holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father" (VS 19).

It is, perhaps, notable that an almost identical formulation of Christianity came forth in Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*. He writes, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (DCE 1).

Thus, something other than mere external imitation of Christ is at work in following Him. John Paul II continues, "Jesus asks us to follow him and to imitate him along the path of love" (VS 20). In other words, imitation must engage the fullest depths of the human will in orienting it toward the good of self and other out of love for God. This seems to be what the Pope is trying to say in reiterating that "*following Christ* is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means *becoming conformed to him* who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross" (VS 21). Obviously, John Paul never uses the phrase "mimetic desire" in his encyclical; nevertheless, it appears that his understanding of human fulfillment indicates a mimetic dimension to the person such that human fulfillment can only happen with the right role model.

To be sure, the primary imitation of Christ in love is still described in terms of **willed** actions ["his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him" (VS 20)]. However, it does not run against the letter of the text to say that John Paul is also encouraging us to imitate the very **desire** of the incarnate Lord to do His Father's will.

### Bridging the Gap between Law and Imitation

Why is the implicit mimetic nature of the person an important point to bring out in interpreting the encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*? One of the Pope's goals is to help the faithful see the intrinsic link between "being a Christian" and observing the Commandments. John Paul chooses a positive definition of how this link can be made. Following St. Thomas, he shows that the Decalogue is an expression of the primary precepts of the natural law which itself flows from a reasonable appreciation of the primary goods of the human person: (care for transmission and preservation of life, social interaction, etc.).

John Paul writes, "The different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections of the one commandment about the good of the person, at the level of

the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor and with the material world. . . . The commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man are meant to safeguard *the good* of the person, the image of God, by protecting his *goods*. "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness" are moral rules formulated in terms of prohibitions. These negative precepts express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage, private property, truthfulness and people's good name" (VS 13).

However, if the fullness of perfection in Christian living is imitation of Christ (and this is the source of morality), might it also be helpful to show how bad imitation can destroy the communion of persons? Indeed, it is the Girardian explanation of mimetic conflict that allows us to see how the Decalogue can be understood negatively; this is exactly what he has done in his 2001 text *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. His text shows that the Decalogue begins with an education in mimetic desire as we have discussed, and this negative possibility of mimesis is precisely what Jesus sets us free from.

Girard explains that "if individuals are naturally inclined to desire what their neighbors possess, or to desire what their neighbors even simply desire, this means that rivalry exits at the very heart of social relations" (2001: 9). Moreover, "mimetic rivalries can become so intense that the rivals denigrate each other, steal each other's possessions, seduce the other's spouse, and, finally, they even go so far as murder" (2001: 11).

So what we see in a comparison of the encyclical to Girard's work is that imitation can be used to explain the positive fulfillment of the law (in Christ) as well as the negative tendencies against which the law speaks (mimetic rivalry afoul).

Girard and Thomas?

Inasmuch as Pope John Paul II appears not simply to be upholding the Church's dogmatic moral teaching but also to be supporting the Thomistic approach to explaining that teaching, the Girardian reading of *Veritatis splendor* sheds light on the need to bring Thomas and Girard into dialogue. One aspect of this encounter is the suggestion of a need to bring a Thomistic understanding of natural law to the sometimes mechanistic aspects of the mimetic theory. It is true that the human person, subject to mimetic desire, can either positively follow another or negatively do so when the desire lands on an "unsharable object." However, the very nature of the "unsharable" can be known by the light of reason at a very early age. This sense of the goods of life, marriage, property and truth are eminently knowable, so that reason as the guiding principle of the will must be considered in any framework that unfolds the processes of desire.

In other words, there is a prior assumption about reality and the truth about things that Girard brings to the table which St. Thomas helps to identify: namely, some objects cannot be shared without violence because those goods belong to the person by the norm of right reason's application of the principles of justice. This distinction allows us to understand why, in fact, there is a difference between mimetic desire in general and

coveting as sin (as the Catechism maintains). There is a level of mimetic desire that arises from natural affinity to the neighbor which can be sifted and controlled by the rule of right reason over the passions according to the knowledge of good and evil in the appropriation of certain goods. Though the human person often does follow the promptings of covetous desire to the point of breaking the commandments, he/she does not have to.

The reasonable Girardian can follow comfortably the ways of the Thomist so that desires can be “prudently examined” before they lead to “perfectly accomplished” human acts according to the light of reason. Reason and justice, of course, are objects of the intellect, not the will and its desires.

At another level, though, it is possible, perhaps, that the Thomistic person can be developed by the Girardian lens so that not only desire becomes educated by the prudential work of the intellect, but also the role model. One area of Thomism that seems to be allowing for more development is the concept of socialization. Perhaps, Girard’s ideas shed new light on how the moral man should be concerned not only with his acts, but also with his role models. The natural law then points us toward the first and fourth commandments in a new light, as these commandments teach about authority – and even role models.

In other words, Girard’s model allows us to look even prior to Thomas’s analysis of the moral act in the very genesis of the desire that starts the full act flowing. From reflection on mimetic desire, the virtuous person can see how surrounding him/herself with good models of desire can help the life of virtue. Again, this seems to be John Paul’s thrust in turning to the parable of the rich young man as a starting point for morality. The rich young man is forced to realize that morality is ultimately about whom he follows and not simply about what he does or does not do.

From skandalon to imitatio Christi

Now, there is an element to Girard’s own presentation which is eminently helpful in seeing a more full link between the Commandments and imitation with Jesus himself. Girard unfolds the concept of the “skandalon.”

As Girard has shown in multiple texts, the Gospel use of the word “skandalon” (followed by the Church’s traditional understanding of “giving scandal”) is one which depends on a mimetic understanding of the person’s desires. To scandalize a child is to present oneself as a role model for the child’s desires such that the child is led toward evil ends.

Moreover, at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus rebukes Peter for rejecting the Cross, he calls him a Satan and Skandalon. Peter is trying to lure Jesus away from proper desire of His Father’s will. Jesus clarifies that Peter is filled only with worldly desire at this point (see Matthew 16:23). Thus, the essential Christian moral teaching is in fact a choice between two types of role models: the ones that lead to worldly conflict and those that lead to the heavenly kingdom, whose ultimate expression is picking up the Cross.

Now, for some Christians, the intrinsic link between law and imitation may be so commonplace that this message seems obvious. However, it is important to note that mimetic desire is precisely what most modern minds refuse to accept. In our day, the rampant exaltation of individualism stems to some extent from the developments of Romanticism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This mode of thinking was the first time that a pervasive cultural exaltation of individual and spontaneous desire seemed to be heralded. In the process, European culture began to consider less and less important the role of models in the genesis of desire. Even Freud, then, who was often quite insightful in seeing mimetic aspects of desire, ultimately argued that the Oedipus Complex (and libido in general) were independent of others, emerging solely within the subject. Thus, Girard's take is helpful in helping us rethink Freud in light of more common-sensical experience of human desire.

Thus, the overall method of Girard allows one to see how the modern notion of freedom (desire divorced from nature) is partially based on an illusory understanding of desire itself. Desire is not free!

Again, when we look at the encyclical, we see John Paul trying to express as clearly as possible the intrinsic link between freedom and truth. He is looking for ways to demythologize the false sense of freedom in the modern world. He writes, "The human issues most frequently debated and differently resolved in contemporary moral reflection are all closely related, albeit in various ways, to a crucial issue: *human freedom*" (VA 31). Moreover, "certain tendencies in contemporary moral theology, under the influence of the currents of subjectivism and individualism just mentioned, involve novel interpretations of the relationship of freedom to the moral law, human nature and conscience, and propose novel criteria for the moral evaluation of acts. Despite their variety, these tendencies are at one in lessening or even denying *the dependence of freedom on truth*" (VS 34).

So, it seems that one task for Catholic apologists today is to provide convincing proofs of the distorting effects of this radical individualism and subjectivism. I submit that Girard's theory of mimetic desire allows us to enter the dialogue with modernity and shed light on the problems of Romanticism inherent in its cultural self-understanding. To point to the absurdity of spontaneous desire in the face of obvious mimesis is to allow modern man a way to look into the mirror in the area most dear to him (his own personal desire) and show him that his freedom from others in desire is usually a slavery to the other. How can you be free from someone in your desire when you need him for your very desire? There is a fundamental paradox in claiming a desire for individuality when that desire is just a copy of someone else's desire for individuality!

A final suggestion for this type of study would be to explore the larger cultural anthropology of Girard (a longer layout of his theory of the violent developments of unleashed mimetic rivalry) to show that, ultimately, the choice between role models in this world is ultimately between persecuting crowd and innocent victim. The Way of the Cross is the only reasonable path to take if one wishes to live the moral life. Such an exploration could help amplify John Paul's message in Part Three of the encyclical.



“The Church proposes the example of numerous Saints who bore witness to and defended moral truth even to the point of enduring martyrdom, or who preferred death to a single mortal sin. In raising them to the honor of the altars, the Church has canonized their witness and declared the truth of their judgment, according to which the love of God entails the obligation to respect his commandments, even in the most dire of circumstances, and the refusal to betray those commandments, even for the sake of saving one's own life” VS 91).

Compare this passage, then, with the strong contrasts of the “culture of life” with “culture of death in *Evangelium vitae*, and a huge opening between Girardian anthropology and papal thought emerges. The abortion culture is “a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable ‘culture of death’. This culture is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency. Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another” (EV 12). John Paul proclaims, “I make this most urgent appeal, that together we may offer this world of ours new signs of hope, and work to ensure that justice and solidarity will increase and that a new culture of human life will be affirmed (EV 6).

The Griffiths article

Is it true that modern man is obsessed with his spontaneous desires? Let us turn to Paul Griffiths’ article, "Nature of Desire" to see if this mimetic approach to John Paul’s encyclical might bear fruit in one particular contemporary discussion.

In his article, Griffiths argues that, “of course, if human desire is infinite, then it is, in a sense, entirely *natural* for us to desire anything we can imagine or conceive. This, in turn, means our desires are naturally open rather than closed, protean rather than formed, awaiting direction rather than already under orders. The range of things on which human desire is focused is, as a matter of fact, infinite, and the plasticity of desire is distinctively human. Consider the desires of your dog, or of the crape myrtle tree in your yard. The desires of these creatures are not infinitely malleable, and the range they are capable of reaching is small. The nature of human desire, then, is that no particular desire is natural. A full appreciation of human nature—a sort of meta-naturalism—properly denies the natural. And this denial applies even to the drives we have genetically: our urges for sex and food and violence. Even these are capable of formation, reformation, and deformation, to the point of their own erasure. This is why we have Casanovas and celibates, gourmands and hunger artists, torturers and pacifists” (Griffiths, 2009).

If Girard is right, though, we can offer one way to show where Griffiths is correct and where he has gone astray. Desire is in fact open, to an extent, to the other: another person from whom I borrow my own desire. Inasmuch as this person can model this or that desire, it is true that my imitation can engender a multitude of possibilities. Indeed, in

saying that “desire awaits orders” Griffiths is implicitly acknowledging that look to the other that is so essential to human desire.

However, if desire is open in its mimetic origins, then it is also constantly open to harmonious and discordant types. This is where Griffiths goes wrong, I think. He does not see that the natural order does have cases of objects which cannot be shared. Hence preservation of life is the most primary thing. We cannot share the same space and existence. The desire to destroy another and take his place is fundamentally contrary to the natural order. The same holds for taking his wife or property. Hence the second half of the Decalogue shows us where that protean mimetic desire will be giving forth the wrong signals. This concept is accessible to common sense; in other words, it is accessible to the light of reason used appropriately according to our human nature (where this phrase is understood classically as the rational animal).

How does my reading of Griffiths sit with one comment on the *First Things* blog? Andrew Greenwell writes, “In Griffiths' view, man is not homo sapiens, but homo desiderius. Focusing then entirely on human desire as the only possible basis for the natural moral law, and rejecting reason's role without mention why reason plays no part, Griffiths finds postlapsarian human desire to be “deranged,” infinitely “protean,” total “chaos,” and bereft of the least whiff of God's prior antelapsarian ordering.”

I agree with this view, though I think that we find in Girard a nice extra starting point for bringing back these “Humeans” to the Thomistic fold. Thus, even if we want to start from man as desiring animal only, we can still show that, if it is granted that these desires are mimetic, then we have to start making distinctions between good and bad desires, because mimetic desire sometimes produces conflict. And then we can find our way back to the Decalogue at that point with the method suggested above.

*Spe Salvi* and the Purification of mimetic desire.

The overt reference to the “purification of desire” in Benedict XVI's encyclical *Spe salvi* signals that there may be a deepening of papal meditation on the mimetic quality of desire and the use of this topic for evangelization. After a long meditation on what we should desire in the modern world and a striking reflection on the challenges of even finding eternal life attractive, Benedict references St. Augustine's explanation that prayer is an “exercise of desire” (*desiderii exercitium*).

At first it seems like it is primarily grace that is being described in this section, for the Pope explains that the heart must be stretched – “God strengthens our desire” (SS 33). However, in the next section, he also explains that, “for prayer to develop this power of purification, it must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. On the other hand, it must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly” (SS 34). Thus, grace is certainly sought in praying to learn how to pray. But what the Pope also seems to be suggesting (even more directly I think than in John Paul II's VS) is that, as desire, prayer

(and hope in particular) can be altered through the imitation of others' desires. Furthermore, if these others are the role models of the Church, then that desire is purified.

## Conclusion

Pope John Paul II has embraced the call of Vatican II to make the Gospel more widely known to the modern world. His encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* makes this plea in particular to moral theologians. At the core of his argument is the need to see *imitatio Christi* as the starting point for approaching the negative precepts of the natural law in the Commandments. In this paper, I have argued that one way to extend the argument in this encyclical (and meet the particular frame of mind of modern man) is to borrow the approach to desire that René Girard has done. This allows us to start largely from the standpoint of Romantic man and his fascination with desire and show, with the help of mimesis, that this fantasy is a grave illusion. Moreover, we can work back to the same Thomistic conclusions. The small discussion of the Griffiths essay was an attempt to show how this might be done. Meanwhile the brief look at *Spe salvi* attempted to confirm that meditations on mimetic desire are particularly pertinent to the mindset of the Roman Pontiff.

Of course, in no way am I advocating a Girardian approach to theology that would trump the primacy of Aquinas whose work allows us to see that the full human act, while beginning with desire, passes through the lens of prudential discernment, wherein the intellect discerns the moral goodness or evil, justness or injustice of the object proposed to the will by desire. This seems to be a fundamental reason why Pope John Paul II, at the heart of the encyclical's moral instruction, maintains that "*The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the "object" rationally chosen by the deliberate will*, as is borne out by the insightful analysis, still valid today, made by Saint Thomas" (VS 78).

Moreover, if will is the appetite of the intellect, then desires can be trained by cultivation of virtue classically understood.

That being said, Girard allows us to see why so much of the Catholic tradition's teaching on "educating desire" passes through mimetic purifications. Says the current Pope: Do you want to grow holy? Pray like holy people have! Girard, then, gives us a new appreciation for why the moral life, according to John Paul II, is first a following of Christ and finally a call to martyrdom. Only in the middle do we engage the rigorous aspects of moral discernment of this or that act. In other words, Girard allows us to see why Pope John Paul II is highlighting the broader picture of the moral life: its final cause, the Good, Who is Christ. Girard allows us to see that the very first cultivation of reason must be toward the choice of good role models, the ones we want to follow in moral acts to achieve our final end: Being, or the Good, or God. In fact, from the beginning, Girard has maintained that mimetic desire is desire for Being . . . (see Girard 1961).

## Works referenced

Girard, Rene. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Trans Yvonne Freccero. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U P, 1966).

Girard, Rene. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

Graham, Tyler. "A Mimetic Reading of *Veritatis Splendor*." Mardas, Curry, McLean, eds. *The Philosophical Legacy of Karol Wojtyla*. Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series I, Culture and Values, Vol. 35, pp. 277-295.

Griffiths, Paul. "The Nature of Desire." *First Things*. November, 2009.

Pope Benedict XVI. Encyclical. *Deus caritas est*. December 25, 2005.

Pope Benedict XVI. Encyclical. *Spe salvi*. November 30, 2007.

Pope John Paul II. Encyclical. *Evangelium vitae*. March 25, 1995.

Pope John Paul II. Encyclical. *Veritatis splendor*. August 6, 1993.

The Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes*. December 7, 1965.