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EDITORIAL: THE SPLENDOUR OF TRUTH

If one compares the pronouncements of prominent churchmen that have captured the headlines in recent months, one might have little hesitation in awarding the prize for theological service to the kingdom of God to the Bishop of Rome, John Paul II. Not that the competition has been particularly strong. One thinks of the last utterances as Bishop of Durham of David Jenkins, as slickly tailored for the media's sound-bite as ever, or of the more surprising – and surprised – burst onto the news-stands of James Weatherhead, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland's last General Assembly. In a rich mix of metaphors he dared 'the media vultures' to 'sharpen their poison pencils' – and so they did, as he declared the virginal conception of Christ the Son of God 'a profound theological fiction', or a symbolic statement, like 'The Lord is my shepherd'.

By comparison, I say, even the editorial of the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* warmly embraces the solidity and good sense of the latest papal encyclical, so impressively entitled *Veritatis Splendor* (Catholic Truth Society, London, 1993; 183pp., £4.50; ISBN 0 85183 899 5). It is addressed to all the Catholic bishops 'regarding certain fundamental questions of the Church's moral teaching'. It will prove a highly disappointing read to those misled by extensive pre-publication 'revelations' into expecting an onslaught on contemporary sexual licentiousness. Such will search hard to find a reaffirmation that certain forms of behaviour (the second Vatican Council listed many of them) are 'intrinsically evil acts', 'because they radically contradict the good of the person made in [God's] image.... They 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.'

The Splendour of Truth is a searching and stretching discussion – especially to readers unversed in the terms of Roman Catholic moral theology – of the relationship between human freedom and God's truth. It was provoked in good part by the dissonance between the teaching given in some Catholic seminaries and theological faculties and the declared faith of the Catholic Church. It conveys a sharp reminder that

By its very nature and procedures, authentic theology can flourish and develop only through a committed and responsible participation in and 'belonging' to the Church as a 'community of faith'.

No evangelical Christian will be able to endorse everything in *Veritatis Splendor*. Even its appeal to natural law sounds a fusty note. Yet, *mutatis mutandis*, much of it could with profit be transposed into a Reformation key, including the health warning addressed to free-ranging Catholic theologians. One cannot but envy a Church which can still talk seriously about its responsibility for its theological institutions and even about disciplining theologians. This section of the encyclical is undergirded by the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1990 (Catholic Truth Society, London; 28pp., £2.50; ISBN 0 85183 814 6). How does the Church of Scotland exercise effective oversight of what it still likes fondly to call its 'Church colleges'? This issue will become ever more urgent as the universities to which they also, and much more significantly, belong, follow society's descent into secularism.

Finally, I must set the record straight. The Archbishop of Canterbury has spoken with uncommon courage on Sudan, and the first pronouncement of the new Bishop of Durham brought a lift to many hearts. Former Moderator Professor T.F. Torrance in this issue makes a profound contribution to the debate about the virgin birth of Christ. We likewise welcome the energising solidity of his *Preaching Christ Today* (Handsel Press, Musselburgh, 1994; 30pp., £1.50; ISBN 1 871828 05 8). It is lovely to find a world-famous theologian rejoicing in the 'direct and blunt way' in which Billy Graham simply directed people to Christ and to Christ alone as Lord and Saviour.