Christ, the Moral law and the Teaching Authority of the Magisterium

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In an important essay Francis A. Sullivan takes up the question as to whether the ordinary and universal magisterium has infallibly taught some moral doctrines. ¹ Sullivan explores this question in reference to the encyclicals *Veritatis splendor* (=VS) and *Evangelium vitae* (=EV). Do these recent encyclicals promote the claim that there are some moral doctrines that have been infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium? After a careful examination of the encyclicals Sullivan concludes that they do give support to this claim. In VS, Sullivan shows there are good reasons to think that the encyclical means to teach “that all traditional Catholic moral doctrine is, in the final analysis, the Church's interpretation of the contents of the Ten Commandments as reaffirmed and further specified in the New Testament.”² VS teaches, Sullivan points out, that the whole moral law, including the natural moral law, is contained in revelation. Furthermore, in VS, the authority of the magisterium to teach moral doctrine is identical to its authority to teach and interpret revealed truth.³ Some important consequences follow from this according to Sullivan. He writes:

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² Ibid., 80.

³ Ibid., 81.
This would insert all moral issues into the primary object of infallibility and make it much easier to claim that many traditional Catholic moral doctrines have been infallibly taught by the ordinary universal magisterium. Among such traditional Catholic moral doctrines are those concerning murder, abortion, and euthanasia.\(^4\)

EV condemned murder, abortion, and euthanasia as particularly grievous violations of the moral law. Sullivan goes on to claim that there are “good reasons” to think that “Pope John Paul intended to invoke not the infallibility that Vatican I attributed to papal definitions but the infallibility that Vatican II attributed to the teaching of the ordinary and universal magisterium.”\(^5\)

\(^4\) Ibid., 83. The primary object of infallibility would be all those things contained in the deposit of faith, that is those things that are divinely revealed. This is to be distinguished from the secondary object of infallibility which refers to those matters which although are not revealed are so connected with revelation that it is necessary for the magisterium to teach them in order to safeguard and explain the deposit of revelation. The magisterium can teach these matters infallibly too. Sullivan argues, rightly, that *Lumen gentium* 25 recognized the distinction between the primary and secondary object of infallibility when taught that infallibility “extends as far as extends the deposit of divine revelation, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded.” Sullivan contends that the secondary object is referred to in the last clause of this sentence. He points to the official explanation of this text by the Theological Commission which clearly confirms this distinction in *Lumen gentium* 25. See Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) 131-34.

\(^5\) Sullivan, “Infallible Teaching on Moral Issues? Reflection on Veritatis Splendor and Evangelium Vitae,” 87. Sullivan goes on to invoke his thesis that a doctrine ought not to be understood as infallibly taught unless this fact is clearly established. For this fact to be clearly established there must a consensus of theologians about it. Sullivan concludes that at the present time it is too early to know whether there will be a consensus of theologians that shows that it is clearly established that the ordinary and universal magisterium has infallibly taught the immorality of murder, abortion and euthanasia. Here, I disagree with Sullivan. The consensus of theologians is a sign but not a condition for knowing when the ordinary and universal magisterium has infallibly taught a doctrine. In the case of *Evangelium vitae*, I contend that when the encyclical clearly invokes the infallibility of the ordinary and universal magisterium for three of its teachings then our knowledge of this rests upon the authority of the declaration itself rather than a future consensus of theologians. For a fuller discussion of my disagreement with Sullivan’s thesis on the consensus of theologians see my article “The Infallibility of the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium: A Critique of Some Recent Observations,” *Heythrop Journal*, 39 (January 1998):
It should be pointed out that a moral truth is still capable of being taught infallibly whether that truth belongs to the first object or the secondary object of infallibility. I would argue that it does not necessarily follow that if the authority of the magisterium to teach moral doctrine is identical to its authority to teach and interpret revelation then all moral matters are thereby inserted into the primary object of infallibility. There may be some moral matters that while not divinely revealed nevertheless have a logical connection to revelation and therefore the magisterium is capable of infallibly teaching them. To be fair, I think Sullivan would probably acknowledge this point because of assertions that are made in the *motu proprio* Ad Tuendam Fidem made public on June 30, 1998. The *motu proprio* seemed to claim that there were certain moral doctrines that belong to the secondary object and which are to be definitively held. See *Origins*, 28 (July 15, 1998): 115. The official commentary on the *motu proprio* gave church teachings against prostitution, fornication and euthanasia as examples of these truths that must be definitively held. For text of the official commentary see *Origins*, 28 (July 15, 1998). None of this changes the fact, which Sullivan has noticed, that if the magisterium’s authority in moral matters is identical with its authority to teach revealed truth then it is easier to claim that numerous traditional moral doctrines have been infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. It could be argued that because many traditional teachings on morality fall within the primary or secondary object of infallibility and because these moral doctrines have been the common teachings of the bishops and popes down through the centuries then these teachings have met the required conditions for the infallibility of the ordinary universal magisterium as stipulated by Vatican II.
Christ, it will serve to clarify what Sullivan has noticed in VS, namely, the argument that the magisterium’s authority to teach moral doctrine is coincident with its authority to interpret revelation. It will also serve to further clarify and strengthen the related argument that a number of traditional moral doctrines have been infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. All of these claims rest upon a Christological foundation. What allows them to be made is the affirmation of the close association between Christ and the natural moral law. If the moral law, as it is known by reason and revelation, is not as seen as one in Christ, then we will have misunderstood why VS claims what it does about the competency of the magisterium in moral matters.  

Furthermore, we will have failed to grasp the truth that goodness and truth of the natural moral law and the revealed moral law is fully manifested in Christ and that it to this goodness and truth that we as human persons are called.

This article unfolds in two parts. In the first part I will review why Sullivan thinks that VS teaches that the whole moral law is contained in revelation. In the second part of this article I will show how and why this doctrine in VS depends ultimately upon a Christological basis. Obviously there are many implications raised by this thesis and they cannot all be treated here. The scope of this paper is very limited. It is my hope, however, that these reflections and conclusions will call attention to VS’s teaching about the relationship between the whole moral law and Christ as well as illuminate the theological basis for the claim in VS about the authority and competence of the magisterium with regard to the moral law.

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7 For an opposite view see Frank Mobbs, *Beyond Its Authority?* (Alexandria, Australia: E.J. Dwyer, 1997). Mobbs thinks that the magisterium has no divine commission or authority to teach natural law.
The Moral Law and Revelation

Sullivan cites several passages from VS that he argues make it hard to avoid the conclusion that this is what the Pope means to teach that the whole moral law is contained in revelation. I give below some of the most important passages cited by Sullivan:

Consequently the decisive answer to every one of man's questions, his religious and moral questions in particular, is given by Jesus Christ, or rather is Jesus Christ himself. (VS2)

Because the Church has been sent by Jesus to preach the Gospel and to “make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all” that he has commanded (cf. Mt 28:19-20), she today once more puts forward the Master’s reply, a reply that possesses a light and a power capable of answering even the most controversial and complex questions. (VS 30)

This good is established, as the eternal law, by Divine Wisdom which orders every being towards its end: this eternal law is known both by man's natural reason (hence it is “natural law”), and-in an integral and perfect way-by God's supernatural Revelation (hence it is called Divine law). (VS 72)

These are the goods safeguarded by the commandments, which, according to St. Thomas,

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8 Sullivan cites VS 2, 5, 28, 30, 72, 79, 81, 82, 116.

9 All quotations from Veritatis splendor, as well as all other papal encyclicals quoted in this essay, are from official Vatican translations.
contain the whole natural law.\textsuperscript{10} (VS 79)

In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture . . . (1Cor 6:9-10). (VS 81)

On the basis of these passages as well as the others that I have not cited here Sullivan concludes that “John Paul II is effectively basing the authority of the magisterium in all moral issues on its authority to interpret divine revelation.”\textsuperscript{11} This interpretation does seem sound. One of the most important claims is in VS 2, quoted above, in which Christ is said to give answer to man’s religious and moral questions. This passage goes on to quote \textit{Gaudium et spes} 22. “In fact, it is only in the mystery of Word Incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man. For Adam, the first Man, was a figure of the future man, namely, of Christ the Lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love.” The pope makes this central anthropological affirmation of Vatican II constitutive of the anthropology of VS.\textsuperscript{12} Pope John Paul II insists in VS that a christological anthropology must inform moral theology. The answer to moral questions about the human person is Jesus Christ, “the light of the nations.” Therefore the pope urges that “People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil.” (VS 8). Moreover, “Christ is the ‘Beginning’ who, having taken on human nature, definitively illumines it in its constitutive elements and in its

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\item Citing ST, I-II, q.100, a.1
\item I have discussed this at greater length in my article “\textit{Gaudium et spes}, the Divine image, and the Synthesis of \textit{Veritatis splendor}” \textit{Communio}, (Winter 1997): 793-814.
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dynamism of charity towards God and neighbor” (VS 53). Sullivan may know of some these passages and their important christological-anthropological claims (he does not cite VS 8 or VS 58) but he does not discuss them in his essay or explain how important they are for understanding why VS claims what it does about the moral law and the magisterium’s competency to interpret the moral law.

This fundamental claim of VS is clear: if Christ is the full revelation of the human person then there are no moral issues that somehow lie outside of Him or apart from Him. There are no great moral questions that Christ does not in some way answer. For Christ’s reply to our questions “is a reply that possesses a light and a power capable of answering even the most controversial and complex questions.” 13 It certainly seems to follow that the Church’s authority in moral matters rests upon its authority to interpret the revelation entrusted to it by Christ. This point is further underscored by the observation that although the eternal law is knowable from natural reason it is only known in an integral and perfect way in the light of divine revelation. Thus the Church accepts the teachings of the Scriptures when it teaches the existence of intrinsically evil acts. The citation from St. Thomas in VS 79 that the commandments contain the whole natural law is another important indication that the pope means to teach that the whole moral law is contained in revelation and that therefore the authority of the magisterium in moral matters is coincident with its authority to interpret divine revelation.

Sullivan also observes that VS strongly upholds “the binding force of the natural moral law” and maintains that there is a distinction between this natural moral law and moral law as revealed

13 VS 30.
by God. VS 74 acknowledges that “the moral order, as established by the natural law, is in principle accessible to human reason.” However, revelation discloses to us that human reason is impaired in its knowledge of the moral law because of sin. Due to the fall the moral law itself cannot be known from reason as God intended. The encyclical insists that we must keep in mind that human reason is fallen, wounded by sin and thus capable of only a partial and imperfect knowledge of the moral law. Thanks to Divine revelation, we are given an integral and complete knowledge of the moral law. This insistence is apparent above in the quotation from VS 72. But Sullivan cites two other passages as well.

Some people, however, disregarding the dependence of human reason on Divine Wisdom and the need, given the present state of fallen nature, for Divine Revelation as an effective means for knowing moral truths, even those of the natural order, have actually posited a complete sovereignty of reason in the domain of moral norms regarding the right ordering of life in this world. (VS 36)

Man is able to recognize good and evil thanks to that discernment of good from evil which he himself carries out by his reason, in particular by his reason enlightened by Divine Revelation and by faith, through the law which God gave to the Chosen People, beginning with the commandments on Sinai. (VS 44)

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15 This claim coheres with the teaching of St. Thomas. For example St. Thomas teaches in ST I-II, q.100, a.5, ad1 that sin obscures the natural law. For St. Thomas sin impacts the efficacy of the natural law. For an interesting and illuminating discussion of how St. Thomas understood the relationship between the natural law and justification in his Commentary on Romans see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. “The Narrative of Natural Law in Aquinas’s Commentary on Romans I,” Theological Studies, 59 (1998): 254-276.
Sullivan observes, rightly, that the conclusion VS draws seems clear: if we need revelation to know the moral law in its integrity and if the Church’s magisterium has been given the charism of authentically and infallibly interpreting revelation, then the authority of the Church’s magisterium in moral matters coincides with its authority to authentically interpret divine revelation.

**The Moral Law: One in Christ**

There is another important passage in VS 45 that Sullivan does not cite but which further confirms his thesis and I believe reveals the christological basis for VS’s claim that the entire moral law is contained in revelation.

Even if moral-theological reflection usually distinguishes between the positive or revealed law of God and the natural law, and, within the economy of salvation, between the “old” and the “new” law, it must not be forgotten that these and other useful distinctions always refer to that law whose author is the one and the same God and which is always meant for man. The different ways in which God, acting in history, cares for the world and for mankind are not mutually exclusive on the contrary, they support each other and intersect. They have their origin and goal in the eternal, wise and loving counsel whereby God predestines men and women “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). God's plan poses no threat to man's genuine freedom; on the contrary, the acceptance of God's plan is the only way to affirm that freedom. (VS 45)

We must remember that the natural moral law does not affirm or protect some good of the human
person that is somehow unrelated to the human person’s salvation and ultimate end.\textsuperscript{16} VS makes the point that all law in one in Christ. Both natural and revealed law have their goal and origin in the fact that the Father predestines us to be conformed to the image of the Son. In VS 45, quoted above, there is clearly evident the christological basis for saying that revelation contains the entire moral law, inclusive of the moral law knowable from reason. This christocentric emphasis, prominent especially in the pope’s Trinitarian encyclicals, is a theme that is present consistently applied throughout VS. In what follows below I want to unpack how this emphasis forms the indispensable basis for the claim that revelation contains the entire moral law. In other words, this claim about the moral law is something rooted in a christological anthropology.

According to VS the natural law is knowledge of that truth and goodness about the human person that is known from reason or the light of understanding that God gave to us at creation. VS, quoting St. Thomas, defines natural law as “nothing other than the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided. God gave this light and this law to man at creation.”\textsuperscript{17} But the natural law also has to do with the truth about the human nature of the person. Thus, in VS 50 we read:

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16 It should be noted that this affirmation adheres perfectly to the moral teaching of St. Thomas who taught that all laws are ordered to the New Law or the evangelical law and are perfected by it. According to St. Thomas the end and goal of all law is to make the human person good, righteous, virtue and just. (ST I-II, q. 92, a.1). Only the New Law, the evangelical Law can accomplish this goal. (ST I-II, q. 106, a.2; ST I-II q.107, a.2). It should be recalled that St. Thomas did not somehow define natural law without reference to theology. See also St. Thomas’ Commentary on Romans 1, Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura, 8\textsuperscript{th} rev. ed., P. Raphael Cai, O.P., ed. (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1953).

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At this point the true meaning of the natural law can be understood: it refers to man's proper and primordial nature, the “nature of the human person,” which is the person himself in the unity of soul and body, in the unity of his spiritual and biological inclinations and of all the other specific characteristics necessary for the pursuit of his end. “The natural moral law expresses and lays down the purposes, rights and duties which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person.”  

This natural law, this light of understanding given to us at creation is nothing less than a certain participation in the eternal law. Appealing to St. Thomas, the pope writes that reason draws its own truth and authority from the eternal law, which in none other than divine wisdom itself. Similarly, in VS 42, the pontiff cites the comments of St. Thomas on Psalm 4: “The light of your face, Lord, is signed upon us, thereby implying that the light of natural reason whereby we discern good from evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else but an imprint on us of the divine light.”  

We ought to speak then of a participatory theonomy whereby our obedience to God’s eternal law has to do with human reason and will sharing in the divine wisdom and providence.

In VS 43 the pope defines the meaning of the eternal law: the wisdom, reason and will of God that lovingly guides and arranges the whole created world. He recalls that Vatican Council II in Dignitatis Humanae 3 made the point “the divine and eternal the divine law itself, the eternal, objective and universal law by which God out of his wisdom and love arranges, directs and

18 The last sentence of this passage quotes Donum Vitae (February 22, 1987), AAS 80 (1988), 74.

19 ST I-II, q.91, a.2.
governs the whole world and the paths of the human community. God has enabled man to share in this divine law . . .” Augustine, we are reminded, explained that the eternal law is “the reason or the will of God, who commands us to respect the natural order and forbids us to disturb it.” St. Thomas equated the eternal law with “the type of the divine wisdom as moving all things to their due end.” But God in his wisdom, according to the Angelic Doctor, cares for the human person not “from without” but “from within” that is “through reason, which, by its natural knowledge of God's eternal law, is consequently able to show man the right direction to take in his free actions.” Thus the pope concludes that the human expression of the eternal law is the natural law and he cites St. Thomas again:

Among all others, the rational creature is subject to divine providence in the most excellent way, insofar as it partakes of a share of providence, being provident both for itself and for others. Thus it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end. This participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law.20

At this point it is important to connect what the pope has written here about the eternal law with what he has written about it in his encyclical Dominum et Vivificantem, 33. Here the pope appears to go beyond St. Thomas21:

20 Ibid. Emphasis mine.

21 Or is St. Thomas more precise than the pope here? In ST I-II, q.93, a.1, ad.2 St. Thomas argues that the eternal law is appropriated to the Son because of the association between type and word. St. Thomas teaches:

With regard to any sort of word, two points may be considered: viz., the word itself, and that which is expressed by the word. For the spoken word is something uttered by the mouth of man, and expresses that which is signified by the human word. The same applies
This Word is the same Word who was “in the beginning with God,” who “was God,” and without whom “nothing has been made of all that is,” since “the world was made through him.” He is the Word who is also the eternal law, the source of every law which regulates the world and especially human acts.

The eternal law is a someone: the Son of the Father. The pope takes the classical teaching on the eternal law and firmly connects it to christology. If the eternal law refers to the wisdom and reason of God then we must think of it in reference to the eternal Logos who is the eternal Son. For Pope John Paul II the natural law, which is a participation in the eternal law, cannot be dissociated from the fact that human persons exist from the beginning, through the Son, the Word, the one Lord. To speak then of the light of natural reason as being nothing less than an imprint on us of the divine light is to really speak about our creation in the Son. Natural law, then, is not somehow autonomous from the fact that the Father has created us in and for his Son so that we might share in the very life of the Trinity. Pope John Paul II does not abstract the natural law in the order of creation from the Father’s plan to elevate it in Christ. We are created with a radical orientation toward the Son and we are called to be sons and daughters in the Son by the power of the Spirit. Thus Gaudium et spes: “It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses man to himself
to the human mental word, which is nothing else than something conceived by the mind, by which man expresses his thought mentally. So then in God the Word conceived by the intellect of the Father is the name of a Person: but all things that are in the Father’s knowledge, whether they refer to the Essence or to the Persons, or to the works of God, are expressed by this Word, as Augustine declares (De Trin. xv. 14). And among other things expressed by this Word, the eternal law itself is expressed thereby. Nor does it follow that the eternal law is a Personal name in God: yet it is appropriated to the Son, on account of the kinship between type and word.

and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love.” In many ways, VS involves a creative thinking out and application of this truth.  

By connecting the eternal law and the natural law to christology, the pope further integrates his emphasis upon the original centrality or primacy of Christ. This emphasis is evident in his first encyclical, Redemptor hominis, (=RH) and continues throughout his later writings, including VS. It is the context for the claim that “He is the Word who is also the eternal law . . . ” For example, in RH 7, the pope contends that “we must constantly aim at Him ‘who is the head,’ ‘through whom are all things and through whom we exist,’ who is both ‘the way, and the truth’ . . . ” Christ is presented in RH 7 as the Head and the pope cites numerous passages from the Scriptures that refer to the total primacy of Christ in creation and redemption. Furthermore in RH 8 we read that Christ as Redeemer reveals the “fundamental truth concerning creation.” In article

22 David Schindler has made the helpful observation that the pope’s thought involves an ontological christocentricism as opposed to a moral christocentricism. The latter certainly sees Christ as the center of human existence, but mainly by intention. Divine revelation in Christ gives us important elements to be added to the final, eschatological content of anthropology. Still, the revelation in Christ makes little or no impact upon the original or creational content of anthropology. In other words, a moral christocentricism underestimates our creation in the Son. Christology tends to be seen as having implications for anthropology rather than informing it from the ground up. A moral christocentricism, Schindler acknowledges, “may recognize the receptive and dialogical dimensions of human existence, the reality of sin and the need for liberation by God from the slavery of sin, but it leaves these elements more or less in a state of juxtaposition to the elements which constitute its original anthropology - and of course juxtaposition is precisely the problem, for it creates the appearance that the elements subsequently added are arbitrary, or of secondary importance.” An ontological christocentricism, which marks the pope’s thought, is different. “What I mean by an ontological christocentricism, then is one, which insists that a (re-)centering in Jesus Christ makes a difference already in the original content of man’s imaging of God. Such christocentricism thus sees receptivity as anterior to creativity in the primitive structure of the creaturely act, relation as a constitutive element of the human person, sin as concretely affecting the human person from the beginning of its (infralapsarian) existence—sees all of these expression of the primacy of God-in-Jesus-Christ in the understanding precisely of man.” See David Schindler, “Christology and the Imago Dei: Interpreting Gaudium et spes,” Communio, 23 (Spring, 1996): 172.
4 of *Dives in misericordia* the pope maintains that Christ, mercy incarnate, best manifests God’s relationship of love with the human race that exists from the mystery of creation. *Redemptoris mater* discusses at length in articles 7 and 8 our election in Christ from the beginning. And in his apostolic letter on the advent of the third millennium, *Tertio millennio adveniente* 4, the pontiff contends that “Christ, the Son who is one being of the Father, is therefore the one who reveals God’s plan for all creation, and for man in particular.”

The emphasis upon the primacy of Christ especially with regard to creation has not been absent from the Holy Father’s weekly Catecheses. On the catechesis for March 5, 1986, “Creation is the Work of the Trinity” we read:

> St. Paul speaks of “one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1Cor 8:6). In the Letter to the Colossians we read: “He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . . all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:15-17). The Apostle emphasizes the active presence of Christ both as cause of creation (“through him) and as its final cause (“for him”). . . . Creation is the work of the Triune God. The world “created in the Word-Son, is “restored” together with the Son to the Father, through that Uncreated Gift, the Holy Spirit, consubstantial with both.”

And in his catecheses on the Mystery of predestination in Christ, May 28, 1986, the pope observes:

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In the Letter to the Colossians we find that the truth of “predestination” in Christ is closely connected with the truth of “creation in Christ.” [quotes Col 1:15-16] Thus, the world created in Christ the eternal Son bears in itself from the beginning, as the first gift of Providence, the call, or pledge of predestination in Christ.  

The primacy of Christ that the pope so strongly affirms in his Trinitarian encyclicals and catecheses is fully operative in VS. It must be kept in mind when in VS he proclaims that “Christ is the ‘Beginning’ who, having taken on human nature, definitively illumines it in its constitutive elements and in its dynamism of charity toward God and neighbor” (VS 53). Christ’s primacy forms an important foundation for the proclamations in VS that Christ is the “decisive answer to man’s questions” (VS2). He is “At the source and summit of the economy of salvation, as the Alpha and the Omega of human history” (cf. Rev 1-8; 21-6; 22-13). Moreover, citing Gaudium et spes 22, the pope proclaims in VS 8: “Christ sheds light on man's condition and his integral vocation”. This constant insistence upon the primacy of Christ is the context for understanding the claim that the Word is the eternal law as well as the claim in VS 45 that there is a distinction but not a separation between the natural law and the positive revealed law (divine law) because both have their origin and goal in the Father’s loving council whereby the Father predestines us to be conformed to the image of the Son. What the pope takes very seriously is Christ, the head and the Alpha by whom the human race is redeemed and in whom we are created.  


25 It is pertinent to recall here how Karl Rahner reminded theologians long ago that a sound a Catholic theology of creation must be christocentric. He wrote: 

It should therefore also be apparent that a doctrine of creation should, in making the
connection between the order of creation and the order of redemption must be integrated into our understanding of the distinction between the natural law and the positive or revealed law. Just as creation and redemption are distinct but find their unity in Christ, so the natural law and the positive law find their unity in Christ the Word who is the eternal law.

To sum up: We have seen that in VS the natural law is presented as nothing less than the light of understanding given to us by the Father at creation. This light of understanding infused in us by God is a certain participation in the Word and Son in whom we are created. Thanks to the natural law, we can come to know something about the truth and goodness of the human person and we can come to a knowledge of the moral law. On the other hand, because of sin we do not know this moral law in its integrity and in its completeness. Our reason, our light of understanding, is fallen and therefore our knowledge of the moral law is partial and incomplete. Nevertheless, creation although fallen is still good and the natural law, including the natural moral law, is still, according to VS, the human expression of the eternal law. The natural law involves a certain participation in the eternal law. This eternal law refers to the wisdom, reason and will of God whereby God loving directs the good creation. Rigorously upholding the primacy of Christ, the eternal Word of God, the pope claims that the Word is the eternal law. In him we are created, in

creatural state concrete, be aware that the world in which the creatural state is fulfilled must be Christocentric. In other words, it must be oriented towards Christology. If this Christology is not, moreover, to seem mythological and therefore incredible, but is rather to be authentic, then Christ should not be presented as the incarnate God in a world which is already present, complete and intelligible, without reference to the appearance of Christ.

See “Creation,” The Concise Sacramentum Mundi, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 326. I would argue that just we should not consider creation apart from Christ so we must not think of natural law apart from him either. To do so leaves one open to the very same danger that Rahner speaks about above.
him we are called to divine adoption from the beginning and in him we are redeemed. The same Word of the Father who is the eternal law reveals “the fundamental truth concerning creation,” fully discloses the truth about the human person and therefore fully reveals the moral law. To be sure, VS acknowledges and affirms a distinction between the natural moral law known by reason and the moral law that is known by divine revelation. The law, however, is one. Christ, the eternal Word, the Lord of history, is the Beginning and the End in the one plan of creation and redemption. In this christocentric understanding, the natural law and what VS calls the positive law (divine law) correspond to the distinction between creation and redemption that is one in Christ. The natural law and the positive law (divine law) are one because they have both their origin and goal in the fact that we are chosen by the Father to be conformed to the image of the Son. The natural law then cannot be conceived as autonomous from the positive, revealed law. To affirm otherwise is to make a christological and hence anthropological mistake about our origin in and through the Word and Son of God.

Conclusion.

It seems true to conclude, as Sullivan does, that according to VS the Church’s authority in moral matters is equivalent to its authority to interpret revelation. As Sullivan rightly observes, this makes it much easier to argue that the ordinary and universal magisterium has infallibly taught many traditional Catholic moral doctrines. The point of this essay has been to clarify and strengthen these claims by showing that they rest ultimately upon a christological foundation. VS teaches what it does about the competence of the magisterium with regard to the moral law because it understands the moral law, as known by reason and by revelation, as one in Christ and because it understands that “Christ fully discloses the truth about man and unfold his noble calling
...” It is because VS teaches that Christ is the decisive answer to our moral questions that it can teach that the magisterium’s authority in moral matters is coincident with its authority to interpret revelation.

Questions about the ordinary and universal magisterium and its authority to interpret the moral law are questions about communion - communion with Christ. If we forget this then claims about the magisterium’s competence to teach infallibly with regard to the entire moral law will go beyond their theological supply lines and run the real risk of appearing as purely juridical claims having little to do with the good of the human person. When VS points out that we must avoid a heteronomy of morality whereby there is an imposition of norms unrelated to the good of the person, this applies too for a theology of the magisterium that explains how it can be that the magisterium can teach infallibly in moral matters. A sound theology of the magisterium must be fully informed by the truth that morality has to do with a participated theonomy whereby obedience to “God’s law effectively implies that human reason and human will are created to participate in God’s wisdom and providence” (VS 41). Faith is the entrance into this participation and communion. The teaching activity of the magisterium must be understood as directed towards serving this communion by cultivating the graced intellectual and moral virtues which bring our hearts and minds into the union with the life of the Triune God. 26 To conceive of a natural moral law as somehow autonomous or external to our vocation to this union, is not only to underestimate the competence of the magisterium in moral matters, it also is to underestimate the fullness of the goodness that the Father desires for every person. For the end of the human person

26 J. A. Dinoia has spelled this out brilliantly in “Communion and the Magisterium: Teaching Authority and the Culture of Grace,” Modern Theology, 4 (October, 1993): 404-18.
is nothing less than divine life in Christ. In him alone the Word, the eternal law, is given the complete revelation of the truth about the human person.