70. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliatio et Paenitentia reaffirmed the importance and permanent validity of the distinction between mortal and venial sins, in accordance with the Church's tradition. And the 1983 Synod of Bishops, from which that Exhortation emerged, "not only reaffirmed the teaching of the Council of Trent concerning the existence and nature of mortal and venial sins, but it also recalled that mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."

71. The relationship between man's freedom and God's law, which has its intimate and living centre in the moral conscience, is manifested and realized in human acts [actus humanus, NOT actus hominis!]. It is precisely through his acts that man attains perfection as man, as one who is called to seek his Creator of his own accord and freely to arrive at full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.119

Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them.120 They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices [i.e., "intention" and freedom, which imply "circumstances" as the ground in which an intention is freely made and put into action], they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits. …

72. The morality of acts is defined by the relationship of man's freedom with the authentic good. 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"). Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with man's true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person choices towards his ultimate end [i.e., "intention" and freedom, which imply "circumstances" as the ground in which an intention is freely made and put into action]: God himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness. … Only the act in conformity with the good can be a path that leads to life. [i.e., a “moral act”, an actus humanus which has as indispensable criteria 1) intention, 2) freedom, and 3) a concrete situation in which the particular act is grasped, intended, and put into action—or what is more commonly called “circumstances.” An act that lacks one or more of these three indispensable criteria might be an actus hominis but it cannot be an actus humanus {a moral act}]

The rational ordering of the human act to the good in its truth and the voluntary pursuit of that good, known by reason, constitute morality. Hence human activity cannot be judged as morally good merely because it is a means for attaining one or another of its goals, or simply because the subject's intention is good [this is true because “intention” ALONE does not constitute an actus humanus].122 Activity is
morally good when it attests to and expresses the voluntary ordering of the person to his ultimate end and the conformity of a concrete action with the human good as it is acknowledged in its truth by reason. *If the object of the concrete action is not in harmony with the true good of the person, the choice of that action makes our will and ourselves morally evil, thus putting us in conflict with our ultimate end, the supreme good, God himself. [Similarly, if the “object” would be “good” but the finis operantis were “bad” this also would make the act “morally evil” for the person who committed it, such as the giving of alms for vainglory (which is the common example used in the moral manuals to illustrate this point)].*

75. But as part of the effort to work out such a rational morality (for this reason it is sometimes called an "autonomous morality") there exist false solutions, linked in particular to an inadequate understanding of the object of moral action [I couldn’t agree more!]. Some authors do not take into sufficient consideration the fact that the will is involved in the concrete choices which it makes [e.g., people who hold that there are “free-floating” moral actions that are somehow “intrinsically evil” without ANY reference to intention or circumstances]: these choices are a condition of its moral goodness and its being ordered to the ultimate end of the person. Others are inspired by a notion of freedom which prescinds from the actual conditions of its exercise, from its objective reference to the truth about the good, and from its determination through choices of concrete kinds of behaviour. According to these theories, free will would neither be morally subjected to specific obligations nor shaped by its choices, while nonetheless still remaining responsible for its own acts and for their consequences [E.g., certain exaggerated existentialist philosophies, perhaps ala Jean Paul Sartre].

78. 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. In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behaviour. [This statement clearly indicates therefore that both freedom {which can only be verified by reference to circumstances} and intention are required--for how else can we speak of the “act of willing” and “freely chosen kind of behavior”??] To the extent that it is in conformity with the order of reason, it is the cause of the goodness of the will; it perfects us morally, and disposes us to recognize our ultimate end in the perfect good, primordial love. By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world [Thus, no “free-floating” moral acts that exist independently of a given moral agent’s own intention and his or her particular circumstances]. Rather, that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person. Consequently, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "there are certain specific kinds of behaviour that are always wrong to choose, because choosing them involves a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil". And Saint Thomas observes that "it often happens that man acts with a good intention, but without spiritual gain, because he lacks a good will. Let us say that someone robs in order to
feed the poor: in this case, even though the intention is good, the uprightness of the will is lacking. [E.g., the “defect” in the action here is a misreading of the “circumstances” by the individual] Consequently, no evil done with a good intention can be excused. 'There are those who say: And why not do evil that good may come? Their condemnation is just' (Rom 3:8).128

The reason why a good intention is not itself sufficient, but a correct choice of actions is also needed, is that the human act depends on its object, whether that object is capable or not of being ordered to God, to the One who "alone is good", and thus brings about the perfection of the person. An act is therefore good if its object is in conformity with the good of the person with respect for the goods morally relevant for him. [This claim seems to imply clearly “circumstances” must be considered, i.e., “respect for the goods morally relevant for him”] Christian ethics, which pays particular attention to the moral object, does not refuse to consider the inner "teleology" of acting, inasmuch as it is directed to promoting the true good of the person; but it recognizes that it is really pursued only when the essential elements of human nature are respected. The human act, good according to its object, is also capable of being ordered to its ultimate end [“capable of being ordered” clearly implies “intention”]. That same act then attains its ultimate and decisive perfection when the will actually does order it to God through charity.

80. Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature "incapable of being ordered" to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. [Very true: some intentions simply cannot be “ordered” to God, such as the intention to do evil to another] These are the acts which, in the Church's moral tradition, have been termed "intrinsically evil" (intrinsece malum): 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 “Church’s moral tradition has always used the expression “intrinsece malum in se” so that must be what is meant here; and I would highlight the key adjective here “ulterior” which means “further.” Thus, “further” intentions and circumstances cannot change the moral meaning of an act which by its free, intentional choice indicates a morally evil object. E.g., killing Imelda Marcos because one believes her to be evil, rapacious, an oppressor of the Philippine people and therefore deserving of death] Consequently, without the least denying the influence on morality exercised by circumstances and especially by intentions, the Church teaches that "there exist acts which per se and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object [Notice here that VS explicitly affirms the “influence on morality” of “circumstances” and “intentions”!]".131 The Second Vatican Council itself, in discussing the respect due to the human person, gives a number of examples of such acts: "Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide [The Latin word used here in the quote from Gaudium et spes would be better translated as “murder,” and this is how it in fact is translated in the official Vatican English translation of Gaudium et spes] , genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit;
whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat labourers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons: all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator." [Here Gaudium et spes lists several immoral behaviors which the Magisterium of the Church had either officially condoned, promoted, prescribed, or tolerated in past centuries. Such historical examples would certainly include at least the following: “mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution.”

Rather than simply condemning the Magisterium for callous commission of “intrinsically evil acts,” we might want to look more carefully at both the “intention” and “circumstances” present in the historical commission of these actions (which today we recognize as morally evil) before we render too harsh a moral verdict on the Church leaders of ages past. If we extend this level of understanding to the past, would this imply that a similar level of understanding could, and even should be extended to the present and the future?]

81. In teaching the existence of intrinsically evil acts, the Church accepts the teaching of Sacred Scripture. The Apostle Paul emphatically states: "Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9-10) [I would observe two things about this Scriptural passage: 1) it is fairly inclusive {e.g., I suspect most of us might be guilty at one time or the other of being at least “revilers”}; and 2) it is taken somewhat out of context of Paul’s theology—since Paul clearly emphasizes that acts alone will not “save” us, but only our lived faith in Jesus Christ].

If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it. [This is true, because a true moral act, whether good or evil, already is determined by sufficient attention to intention and circumstances. Further attention to intention and circumstances can either magnify or minimize the culpability of the agent, but not change it from evil to good. In other words, if something is genuinely a sin (which demands knowledge and consent along with the “matter”) then mere “good” intentions or “extenuating circumstances” ALONE cannot change the sin into an act of goodness. E.g., if by shooting Imelda Marcos an individual hopes to avenge the injustices she and her husband perpetrated on the Philippine people, this “intention” may “reduce” the gunman’s culpability, but it does not change the act of Imelda’s murder into a morally good act.] They remain “irremediably” evil acts; per se and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person. "As for acts which are themselves sins (cum iam opera ipsa peccata sunt), Saint Augustine writes, like theft, fornication, blasphemy, who would dare affirm that, by doing them for good motives (causis bonis), they would no longer be sins, or, what is even more absurd, that they would be sins that are justified?" [Be sure to look at the definition of sin which Veritatis Splendor gives above in #70, since it clearly reiterates the long-standing tradition of the Church that sin cannot be judged apart from knowledge and consent, and these two criteria once again imply “intention” and “circumstances.”]
Consequently, circumstances or intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act "subjectively" good or defensible as a choice.

82. Furthermore, **an intention is good when it has as its aim the true good of the person in view of his ultimate end.** [Here we see once again that “intention” is critical to the construction of the “object” of a moral act. Furthermore an act must take place in both time and space, and this fact means that “circumstances” are absolutely required for a moral act, since the concrete specifications of “this time” and “this place” will necessarily be distinct and different in some way from “this other time” and “this other place.” Thus, it is logically impossible to construct, according to Veritatis Spendor’s own words, a human moral act that is totally devoid of any reference whatsoever to intention and circumstances. ] But acts whose object is "not capable of being ordered" to God and "unworthy of the human person" are always and in every case in conflict with that good. Consequently, respect for norms which prohibit such acts and oblige *semper et pro semper*, that is, without any exception, not only does not inhibit a good intention, but actually represents its basic expression.