

# THE NATURAL LAW AND THE HUMAN PERSON

The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God has given this light or law at creation. – St. Thomas Aquinas



*Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law by Rembrandt*

The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the human person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1956

# Table of Contents

---

1. Introduction: What is law?
2. Moral Law & Physical Law
3. The Law & The Ten
4. The Foundation of Human Civilization
5. Conscience & Reason
6. Truth & Consequence – Proverbs
7. The Way of the World
8. Morality & The Law
9. The Word Made Flesh



*The Last Judgment by Michelangelo*

---

# Introduction: What is Law?

---



*The Judgment of Solomon* by Nicolas Poussin

Law is a rule of conduct enacted by a competent authority for the purpose of governing human activity for the sake of the common good. Jurisprudence is the theory, philosophy and practice of law. It addresses the tension between human freedom and the social order.

A fundamental principle in general jurisprudence is natural law. Natural law refers to the limits to human authority and man's ability to legislate behavior. It is the rule of conduct inscribed in us by God. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, it is "nothing else than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law" of God. Thus, natural law supersedes human law.

The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie:

The natural law is written and engraved in the soul of each and every man, because it is human reason ordaining him to do good and forbidding him to sin. . . But this command of human reason would not have the force of law if it were not the voice and interpreter of a higher reason to which our spirit and our freedom must be submitted.

– *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1954*

Humanity did not create the natural law. It has been inscribed in man by the Creator and can be accessed through use of intellect and reason. The foundations of all law are accessible through human

---

---

reason and it is from these natural laws of creation that human laws obtain their influence.

God is the authority of the natural law and its creator making him truly the “expert” of all jurisprudence. Since the human person is made in the image of God, all men are born with an innate comprehension of the natural law.

Natural law is based upon on “first principles” as noted by St. Thomas Aquinas,

*“...this is the first precept of the law that good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of the natural law are based on this...”*



*The Apotheosis of St. Thomas Aquinas by Francisco de Zurbarán*

---

# Moral & Physical Law

---

The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom. [It] presupposes the rational order, established among creatures for their good and to serve their final end. All law finds its first and ultimate truth in the eternal law. It is at once firm in its precepts and its promises, worthy of love.

– *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1950*

There are different expressions of the moral law, all of them interrelated: eternal law - the source, in God, of all law; natural law; revealed law, comprising the Old Law and the New Law, or Law of the Gospel; finally, civil and ecclesiastical laws.

– *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1952*

All creation is subject to laws and those laws provide order for the entire universe. The physical world remains in tact because of these laws. God designed and ordained these laws. Examples include gravity, motion, etc. They are intelligible, constant and measurable laws.

The physical laws establish an order to creation. All physical matter is subject to their “judgment” and constraint. As there are laws regarding physical matter, there are also established laws regarding human activities. Such laws do exist and they include natural law. They too have judgments and constraints on human societies. The human person can recognize these and study them by using his free will and intellect which are gifts given by God that make man “in the image of God”. These are intelligible laws and wise is the person who recognizes and comprehends them.



*Jesus Among the Doctors* by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres

---

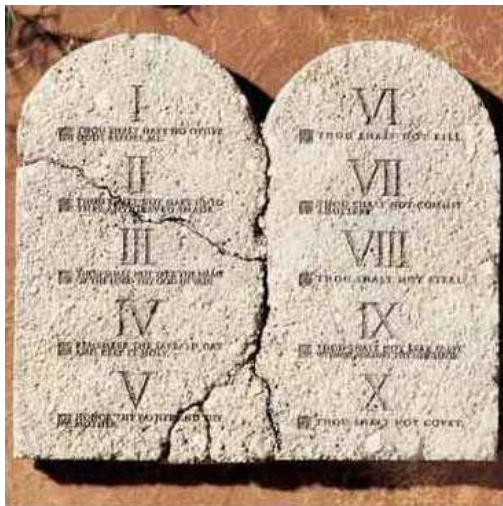
# The Law & The Ten

---

From the beginning, God had implanted in the heart of man the precepts of the natural law. Then he was content to remind him of them. This was the Decalogue.\*

– St. Irenaeus

The natural law is written on the heart of every person (Rom 2:14-15). But due to sin man has a difficult time perceiving it. God, through His servant Moses, recorded these laws on stone and they are now referred to as the 10 Commandments. These laws reveal what is required for the love of God and love of neighbor. The first three laws concern the love of God and the other seven the love of neighbor.



1. I am the Lord your God; you shall not have strange gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

It is because of these laws of God, written on the soul of every person from the moment of conception that has enabled human civilization to develop. These laws establish the social order, the "glue" by which human activity is to be conducted, and the reason why civilization is possible. It is only because of God's love for man, and His established law, that humanity has a history of civilization to claim for himself.

---

\* The collection of precepts written on two tables of stone as recorded in the book of Exodus

# The Foundation of Human Civilization

---



*The Triumph of Civilization* by Jacques Réattu

If not for the natural law and man made laws, unruliness would be inevitable and human endeavors would fail. Yet, even with these laws fully recognized, the effect of original sin disposes man to acts of injustice and grievance. Although in a fallen state, man is not an absolute instinctual creature devoid of freedom and principles. Man

was created with a deliberate vocation to love.

Because of God's love for man and woman, made in His Image, and instilled with the natural law, humanity, with God's grace and assistance, can love and accomplish marvelous things. Through sin, man can inflict harm and destruction on himself and others. This deliberate forsaking of God muffles the convictions of the natural law, and man diminishes himself and becomes a creature bound by misdirected instinctual impulses, hedonism and self-preservation. In this state, civilization emerges not as a catalyst or tribute for the transcendent vocation of love but rather a brutal, dismal and desperate existence.

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.

– *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1776*

---

# Conscience & Reason

---



Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of divine law.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1778

Because of the fallen nature of man, originating from his insistence on deciding for himself what is good and evil man has an ill-suited disposition to be narcissistic. Because of this sinful tendency, God has lovingly entrusted to his Church, by His Holy Spirit, the authority to teach what is true (good) and that what is not (evil), fulfilling and recapitulating through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the loving intention of the law.

Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teaching.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1783

---

# Truth & Consequence Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs instructs in wisdom. Its primary audience is the young and inexperienced but is also for those who desire advanced training in wisdom. The wisdom which the book teaches covers a whole field of human and Divine activity, ranging from matters purely secular to the more lofty moral and religious truths. Proverbs was the young Hebrews 'catechism', an instruction in the basic principles of religion utilizing oral repetition. Poetic in its nature, the Proverb's first verse was read by the instructor and the students would respond with the second line.



For example, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; wisdom and instruction the fools despise." (Proverbs 1:7) The teacher would say: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;" and the students would respond accordingly: "Wisdom and instruction the fools despise."

In this fascinating book of the Bible much is revealed concerning the "modus operandi" or how the "rules of consequence" function in a world created with laws and purpose. Since the natural law is intended for all things that are good (love), its absence must have the opposite result.

Additional Proverbs include:

A son who fills the granaries in summer is a credit; a son who slumbers during harvest a disgrace. – Proverbs 10:5

"He, who shuts his ear to the poor, will himself call and not be heard." – Proverbs 21:13

"Crime is the entertainment of the fool; so is wisdom for the man of sense." – Proverbs 10:23

---

# The Way of the World

---

The Scriptures reveal a great deal about the world in which we live and the human person in particular. Although some may come to believe that the world is entrusted to those with self-proclaimed supremacy and importance, the Bible speaks of a much different reality. It is the righteous; those who adhere to the natural and divine law, who love God that are ultimately favored to inherit the earth and the kingdom to come. These wonderful Biblical stories speak of this revelation:



- Before becoming king of Israel, David was a ruddy shepherd boy who took down the mighty warrior Goliath with only a sling and a stone.
- The Second Person of the Trinity humbled himself by becoming man, modeling a life of humility, and then offering himself on the cross as a sacrificial offering for the salvation of mankind.
- Jesus healed many, including the Centurion's servant who was not part of the Chosen People, but healed him because of the humility and faith of the Centurion.
- St. Peter, a fisherman with a passionate charter, denied ever knowing Jesus when he was arrested, but after repentance, he was still chosen to be the first vicar of Christ for the Church.
- The Chair of Peter in Rome, which was once the brutal throne of Cesar and the mighty Roman Empire, now governs on matters of love, truth, and the eternal and natural law.

All natural and divine law reveal the inherent sacred dignity of the human person which is granted by the Creator. All human life is willed by and for God. Yet, because of sin which separates men from God, man becomes alienated from the truth, his own self, and the world around him. Because of sin the exceptional attributes which God bestowed on the human person (reason, intellect and free will) are turned away from fulfilling the true vocation of man and instead are used to scar human history with injustice, pain, and atrocity. Reconciliation becomes necessary. This reconciliation comes in the person of Jesus, Christ.

---

# Morality & The Law

---



Sin is an offense against God and a revolt against eternal and natural law. It proclaims oneself to be “like god,” empowered to determine on one’s own volition what is right and wrong, good or evil. It is always with a selfish perversion for the benefit of self, often marked with a complete disregard for God and others.

All human actions and behavior can be morally evaluated because the human person is free, has an intellect, and free will. He acts and behaves deliberately as *the father of his acts*. He is also created with an internal “guide,” a voice, which God has placed in his heart. This guide is called conscience. This internal voice is formed in us to guide us to do good and avoid evil. Parents, pastors, teachers and those in authority are entrusted with the formation of a well formed conscience. Like the nerves in our bodies that warn us of potential danger or injury, the moral conscience warns us about good and evil decisions and the consequences that such decisions pose for us.

Sin is an offense against reason, truth and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as ‘an utterance, a deed or a desire contrary to the external law.’

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1849

---

# The Word & The Law

---

The Word of God is the light which gives direction for the proper course for life. Jesus, the Word and the Light of the world, is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Because God does not veer, nor resend from His promises, His Word is always steadfast and true. The eternal and natural laws are also unchanging. God is the author of order and peace and not of chance or chaos (1 Cor 14:33). Truth and order (law) provide the solid foundation that enables human life and dignity to prosper and flourish in society.

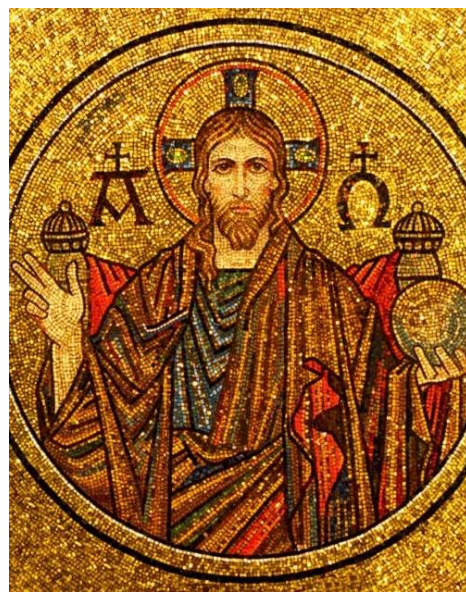
The natural law is a participation in God's wisdom and goodness by man formed in the image and likeness of God. It expresses the dignity of the human person and forms the basis of his fundamental rights and duties.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1978

The impetus for all of God's law for man is the love of the human person and God's desire for relationship with him. God's love for man is consistent and true as revealed in His Word and His law.

By his reason, man recognizes the voice of God which urges him to do what is good and to avoid what is evil. Everyone is obligated to follow this law, which makes itself heard in conscience and is fulfilled in the love of God and of neighbor. Living a moral life bears witness to the dignity of the person.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1706



# The Word Made Flesh

---

The Word of God became flesh, Jesus Christ. The Word, animated and living, dwelt among us and the essence of the law was revealed in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love your Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.’” – Mat 22:36-40

Jesus washed the apostles feet, healed the sick, and loved the “unlovable,” all the while announcing God’s great compassion towards those of the first covenant and of the law. By fulfilling the words of the prophets and illuminating the eternal and natural law, the crucified Christ reconciles the justice of the law and God’s love for mankind. Through this reconciliation the Book of Life is opened and the names of the defended within the Book are granted eternal life with God the Father.

“...who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God, something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness and found human in appearance he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. “

- Philippians 2:6-8



*Sistine Madonna by Raphael Raffaello*

---

---

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; Let  
your glory be above all the earth. – Psalm  
57:5



*Christ Crucified by Diego Velazquez*

God's passionate love for his people-for humanity is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim prefigurement of the mystery of the Cross: so great is God's love for man that by becoming man he follows him even into death, and so reconciles justice and love.

– *God is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI

---

---

This pamphlet was authored by:

Al Hooper  
Director of the Office of Social Ministry  
Archdiocese of Denver

If you enjoyed this pamphlet you  
will also enjoy:

***The Creed: A Presentation on the Creed &  
Its Implication for Catholic Social Teaching***

&

***The Vocation of the Human Person***

---