



GOD'S SALVATION: LAW AND GRACE

1. Natural Law and the Old Law

Texts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

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Called to beatitude but wounded by sin, man stands in need of salvation from God. Divine help comes to him in Christ through the law that guides him and the grace that sustains him:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Phil 2:12-13) (1949)

1. THE MORAL LAW

What is the moral law?

The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom. Its biblical meaning can be defined as fatherly instruction, God's pedagogy. It prescribes for man the ways, the rules of conduct that lead to the promised beatitude; it proscribes the ways of evil which turn him away from God and his love. It is at once firm in its precepts and, in its promises, worthy of love. (1950)

All law finds its ultimate truth in the eternal law

Law is a rule of conduct enacted by competent authority for the sake of the common good. The moral law presupposes the rational order, established among creatures for their good and to serve their final end, by the power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator. All law finds its first and ultimate truth in the eternal law. Law is declared and established by reason as a participation in the providence of the living God, Creator and Redeemer of all. “Such an ordinance of reason is what one calls law.” (Pope Leo XIII)

“Alone among all animate beings, man can boast of having been counted worthy to receive a law from God: as an animal endowed with reason, capable of understanding and discernment, he is to govern his conduct by using his freedom and reason, in obedience to the One who has entrusted everything to him.” (Tertullian) (1951)

Different expressions of the moral law

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. (1952)

Jesus Christ is the end of the law

The moral law finds its fullness and its unity in Christ. Jesus Christ is in person the way of perfection. He is the end of the law, for only he teaches and bestows the justice of God: “For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified” (Rom 10:4) (1953)

I. THE NATURAL MORAL LAW

Engraved in the soul of each and every man

Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good. 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.” (Pope Leo XIII) (1954)

Essential precepts of the moral life

The “divine and natural” law shows man the way to follow so as to practice the good and attain his end. The natural law states the first and essential precepts which govern the moral life. It hinges upon the desire for God and submission to him, who is the source and judge of all that is good, as well as upon the sense that the other is one's equal. Its principal precepts are expressed in the Decalogue. This law is called “natural,” not in reference to the nature of irrational beings, but because reason which decrees it properly belongs to human nature:

“Where then are these rules written, if not in the book of that light we call the truth? In it is written every just law; from it the law passes into the heart of the man who does justice, not that it migrates into it, but that it places its imprint on it, like a seal on a ring that passes onto wax, without leaving the ring.” (St. Augustine)

“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 the creation.” (St. Thomas Aquinas) (1955)

The natural law is universal – its authority extends to all men

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 person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties:

“For there is a true law: right reason. It is in conformity with nature, is diffused among all men and is immutable and eternal; its orders summon to duty; its prohibitions turn away from offence... To replace it with a contrary law is a sacrilege; failure to apply even one of its provisions is forbidden; no one can abrogate it entirely.” (Cicero) (1956)

Application of the natural law varies greatly; it can demand reflection that takes account of various conditions of life according to places, times, and circumstances. Nevertheless, in the diversity of cultures, the natural law remains as a rule that binds men among themselves and imposes on them, beyond the inevitable differences, common principles. (1957)

It is immutable

The natural law is *immutable* and permanent throughout the variations of history; it subsists under the flux of ideas and customs and supports their progress. The rules that express it remain substantially valid. Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies:

“Theft is surely punished by your law, O Lord, and by the law that is written in the human heart, the law that iniquity itself does not efface.”
(St. Augustine) (1958)

A solid foundation for moral rules and civil law

The natural law, the Creator's very good work, provides the solid foundation on which man can build the structure of moral rules to guide his choices. It also provides the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community. Finally, it provides the necessary basis for the civil law with which it is connected, whether by a reflection that draws conclusions from its principles, or by additions of a positive and juridical nature. (1959)

Sinful man requires divine revelation to give certainty to the precepts of natural law

The precepts of natural law are not perceived by everyone clearly and immediately. In the present situation sinful man needs grace and revelation so moral and religious truths may be known “by everyone with facility, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error” (Pope Pius XII). The natural law provides revealed law and grace with a foundation prepared by God and in accordance with the work of the Spirit. (1960)

II. THE OLD LAW

The Law of Moses

God, our Creator and Redeemer, chose Israel for himself to be his people and revealed his Law to them, thus preparing for the coming of Christ. The Law of Moses expresses many truths naturally accessible to reason. These are stated and authenticated within the covenant of salvation. (1961)

The Ten Commandments

The Old Law is the first stage of revealed Law. Its moral prescriptions are summed up in the Ten Commandments. The precepts of the Decalogue lay the foundations for the vocation of man fashioned in the image of God; they prohibit what is contrary to the love of God and neighbour and prescribe what is essential to it. The Decalogue is a light offered to the conscience of every man to make God's call and ways known to him, and to protect him against evil:

“God wrote on the tables of the Law what men did not read in their hearts.” (St. Augustine) (1962)

The Old Law is holy, spiritual and good but imperfect

According to Christian tradition, the Law is holy, spiritual and good, (Cf. Rom 7:12, 14,16) yet still imperfect. Like a tutor it shows what must be done, but does not of itself give the strength, the grace of the Spirit, to fulfil it. Because of sin, which it cannot remove, it remains a law of bondage. According to St. Paul, its special function is to denounce and *disclose sin*, which constitutes a “law of concupiscence” in the human heart. (Cf. Rom 7) However, the Law remains the first stage on the way to the kingdom. It prepares and disposes the chosen people and each Christian for conversion and faith in the Saviour God. It provides a teaching which endures for ever, like the Word of God. (1963)

A preparation for the Gospel

The Old Law is a *preparation for the Gospel*. “The Law is a pedagogy and a prophecy of things to come.” (St. Irenaeus) It prophesies and presages the work of liberation from sin which will be fulfilled in Christ: it provides the New Testament with images, “types”, and symbols for expressing the life according to the Spirit. Finally, the Law is completed by the teaching of the sapiential books and the prophets which set its course toward the New Covenant and the Kingdom of heaven.

“There were..., under the regimen of the Old Covenant, people who possessed the charity and grace of the Holy Spirit and longed above all for the spiritual and eternal promises by which they were associated with the New Law. Conversely, there exist carnal men under the New Covenant, still distanced from the perfection of the New Law: the fear of punishment and certain temporal promises have been necessary, even under the New Covenant, to incite them to virtuous works. In any case, even though the Old Law prescribed charity, it did not give the Holy Spirit, through whom ‘God's charity has been poured into our hearts’ (Rom 5:5).” (1964)

IN BRIEF

- **According to Scripture the Law is a fatherly instruction by God which prescribes for man the ways that lead to the promised beatitude, and proscribes the ways of evil. (1975)**
- **“Law is an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by the one who is in charge of the community”. (St. Thomas Aquinas) (1976)**
- **Christ is the end of the law (cf. Rom 10:4); only he teaches and bestows the justice of God. (1977)**
- **The natural law is a participation in God's wisdom and goodness by man formed in the image of his Creator. It expresses the dignity of the human person and forms the basis of his fundamental rights and duties. (1978)**
- **The natural law is immutable, permanent throughout history. The rules that express it remain substantially valid. It is a necessary foundation for the erection of moral rules and civil law. (1979)**
- **The Old Law is the first stage of revealed law. Its moral prescriptions are summed up in the Ten Commandments. (1980)**
- **The Law of Moses contains many truths naturally accessible to reason. God has revealed them because men did not read them in their hearts. (1981)**
- **The Old Law is a preparation for the Gospel. (1982)**