

A Reading on the Natural Moral Law in the Catechism of the Catholic Church

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“A catechism should faithfully and systematically present the teaching of Sacred Scripture, the living Tradition in the Church and the authentic Magisterium, as well as the spiritual heritage of the fathers, Doctors and Saints of the Church, to allow for a better knowledge of the Christian mystery and for enlivening the faith of the People of God.”¹

Thus John Paul II describes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: a systematic presentation of the fundamentals of the Catholic Faith. The said fundamentals would include orthodox tenets, liturgical instructions, moral formation and directions for prayer. Catechesis is part of the specific process of pastoral evangelization of the Church. Number 5 of the *Catechism* explicates:

Catechesis is an education in the faith of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life.

Truly, as a way of deepening knowledge and imparting guidance on morals, liturgy and prayer, catechesis is a necessary mission of the Church.

¹ John Paul II, “Fidei Depositum” in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Manila: ECCCE, Word and Life Publications, 1994), 5.

The historical origin of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* dates back to the 1985 Synod of Bishops, though catechesis and earlier catechisms antedate the former for hundreds of years.² Some participants to the Synod recommended a universal catechism for the whole Church. Thus, the Pope appointed a Commission of Cardinals under the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith himself, then Cardinal Ratzinger, to oversee and coordinate the preparation of the catechism.³ After several drafts and worldwide consultation, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was officially published in October 11, 1992, on the thirtieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.⁴

The said catechism became an instant bestseller.⁵ The Catholic faithful and even members of other denominations were eager to have a copy of the said book with the aim of reading and understanding the Church's fundamentals.

Natural Law is considered as an established norm of Catholic morality. However, of all the norms of morality, it is the "least biblical," for not many scriptural texts are devoted to allusions to it. Thus, it makes the subject hard to elucidate unless the authority of the Church's Magisterium is invoked. Add to this the proliferation of diverse moral theories in the learning circles. For these reasons, the entries in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, representing the fundamental view of the Church on the matter, would be a very interesting read.

The subject of Natural Law is found in Part Three of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which deals with morality. It is under the first section of the said Part that generally discusses the Catholic view of actions with respect to good and evil.⁶ The

² Cf. Joseph L. Roche, S.J. in "Studying the New Catechisms: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*" in *Landas* 9 (1995), 104.

³ Cf. Bernardito C. Auza, "The Catechism of the Catholic Church: History and the Reasons Behind its Project" in *Philippiniana Sacra* 28 (1993), 91.

⁴ Cf. Roche, 104.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 103.

⁶ Cf. F. Vosman and K.-W. Merks (Eds., Intro.), *Aiming at Happiness: The Moral Teaching in the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 189-190.

section likewise serves as the introduction to the second section that focuses on the Commandments, which illuminates morality from the perspective of faith.

In these pages I will attempt to elaborate the Numbers in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* devoted to the Natural Law with the help of some commentaries and other sources.

I. The Natural Moral Law in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

A. The Moral Law

The discussion of the Natural Law in the *Catechism* is introduced through the Moral Law – the whole that includes all laws proper to man. The introduction starts in Number 1950:

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.

The moral law is God's fatherly direction for man on the proper paths he has to take for his actions. It is a providential guide that leads man to the perfection of his nature that God has imbued him. It leads man towards goodness and away from evil. As hinted in the *Catechism*, this paragraph is related to Number 306:

God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out he also makes use of his creatures' cooperation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of almighty God's greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of cooperating in the accomplishment of his plan.

The above Number stresses man's role in God's salvific plan: that of active participation. This also applies in the fulfillment of the moral law, for after all it is part of God's overall plan of saving man. Man has to cooperate with God's generous gestures, one of

which is the moral law. Besides, he is given freedom to decide his own destiny. Man has to choose goodness all the time as a supreme sign of his cooperation with the Divine.

The next paragraph, Number 1951, dwells further on the nature of moral 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." (Leo XIII, cf. St. Thomas Aquinas)

Most ideas of this part, including the above definition of law, are truly the Angelic Doctor's.⁷ Any law should be imposed by a "competent authority" for it to be valid. In the case of the moral law, it is God's Reason, who impresses it upon man who also has the ability of reason, which is itself a precious gift from God. This is very clear in Tertullian's statement quoted in Number 1951:

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)

In view of man's rational endowment, the moral law is exclusive to him. It is only man that can discern the duties and obligations attached to a certain law. This he does by the use of his rational faculty. Through it, man discovers, and participates in, God's plan for him as expressed in the moral law.

As a progression, Number 1952 states:

⁷ Cf. Gerard J. Hughes SJ, "Our Human Vocation" in Michael Walsh (Ed.) *Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 341.

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.

The eternal law, which is God's overall plan for the created order, is the ultimate source of all moral law. The moral law, which is stated in Scripture is the so-called "revealed law," while the one that is found deep in human nature is the "natural law." The moral laws that further define the abovementioned are the "civil laws" and the "ecclesiastical laws." The former are enacted by civil authorities, the latter by the Church.

Number 1953 continues:

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 every one who has faith may be justified." (Rom 10:4.)

As God, Jesus is the source of the moral law. But, as man, he has become the best exemplar in realizing it. The related paragraph, Number 578, explains this further:

Jesus, Israel's Messiah and therefore the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, was to fulfill the Law by keeping it in its all-embracing detail – according to his own words, down to "the least of these commandments." (Mt. 5:19) He is in fact the only one who could keep it perfectly. On their own admission the Jews were never able to observe the Law in its entirety without violating the least of its precepts. This is why every year on the Day of Atonement the children of Israel ask God's forgiveness for their transgressions of the Law. The Law indeed makes up one inseparable whole, and St. James recalls, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it." (Jas 2:10)

Jesus thus has become the unifying factor of all moral laws. It is in Jesus that one can find the perfect example of complying with them in all their details.

B. The Natural Law

The formal discussion on the Natural Law in the *Catechism* starts in Number 1954:

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.

Natural Law is the “original sense” because it is the foremost sense through which man distinguishes between right and wrong. It is found in his nature and he discovers it by means of his reason. This paragraph also shows that the Natural Law is knowable by all. No one could be excused not to know it, for it lies in everyone’s soul. This refers to the Natural Law’s property of “recognizability.”⁸ As quoted by the same paragraph, Leo XIII stresses:

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. (Leo XIII)

Number 1954 is related to Number 1776:

“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has 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.” (GS 16)

In using his reason to guide his own actions, man can always discover the Natural Law. As the paragraph points out,

⁸ Cf. Alfredo Panizo, OP, *Ethics or Moral Philosophy* (Quezon City: UST Textbook Series, 1964), 58.

the Natural Law is truly engraved by God in man's core. God is the source of the Natural Law.

Number 1955 continues:

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.

This reiterates that the Natural Law is the original moral sense that has the "first precepts" of moral living. Man's innate search for fulfillment with God is the foundation to which the Natural Law is securely tied. This likewise brings about man's sense of equality with other men. St. Augustine is quoted in the said number:

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)

This only regards the Natural Law as expressive of the truth, which is ultimately sourced in God. Its concrete manifestation is justice towards others. As quoted, St. Thomas Aquinas reverberates:

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)

Also, the Natural Law is summarized in the Decalogue. The most important principles of the Natural Law are expressed in the latter. This is explained in Number 2070:

The Ten Commandments belong to God's revelation. At the same time they teach us the true humanity of man. They bring to light the essential duties, and therefore, indirectly, the fundamental rights inherent in the nature of the human person. The Decalogue contains a privileged expression of the natural law.

This emphasizes God's gesture of making His Will known to man that He even revealed the most important precepts for man's benefit even though the Natural Law, as it is, is already knowable by man's reason. St. Irenaeus has a good statement on this, which is quoted by the Number:

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 next Number stresses the Natural Law's property of "universality."⁹ It pertains to the scope of the Natural Law, which is for all men – wherever, past, present and future. No one can plea for an excuse from its authority, not even a Non-Christian. Number 1956 reads:

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.

That the Natural Law is primarily expressed by the Decalogue could already be a proof that it is truly universal. History can attest that there are many parallels to the Ten Commandments elsewhere in the ancient world.¹⁰ The Number quotes the pagan Cicero to underscore the point that even a Non-Christian would acknowledge it:

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

⁹ Cf. Panizo, 58.

¹⁰ Cf. Hughes, 341.

away from offense.... 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)

The next Number (1957) zeroes in on the application of the Natural Law to concrete situations and actions:

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.

This Number is “carefully nuanced.”¹¹ After stressing that the Natural Law is universal, it goes to say that its application is varied. This does not mean however that there could be diverse opposing interpretations of the Natural Law. It simply recommends that the Church should be open to the reflections of others and should learn from them. And, also, the Church should be sensitive to the situations of different peoples and cultures in adapting to them the Church’s teachings on the Natural Law.¹² This attitude is reminiscent of the tendency of the inspired writers to incorporate moral insights from the non-Christian world into their writings.¹³

Unfortunately, the *Catechism* does not elaborate on how this varied application should be carried out. This simply suggests that concerned Catholics must pay attention to contemporary discussions of this topic.¹⁴

The next Number (1958) accentuates another important property of the Natural Law:

The natural law is immutable and permanent throughout the variations of history; it subsists under the flux of ideas

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹² Cf. Brennan Hill and William Madges, *The Catechism: Highlights and Commentary* (Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1994), 96.

¹³ Cf. Hughes, 341.

¹⁴ Cf. Hill and Madges, 96.

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.

By “immutability,” the Natural Law is unchanging regardless of the changes and innovations in society.¹⁵ What was evil in its estimation will remain evil whatever happens. This simply shows that the Natural Law is not dependent on legislation or social conventions. As a direction from God in the heart of man, it shares in the nature of the Creator – it subsists any change in the created world including human progress. The Number quotes St. Augustine’s basic example that illustrates the permanence of the Natural Law:

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)

Number 1956 alludes to the fourth property of the Natural Law – “obligatory.”¹⁶ However, Number 2072, related to Number 1958 in view of its mention of immutability, is more explicit on this:

Since they express man’s fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, *grave* obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart.

Though this Number talks about the Decalogue, it still applies to the Natural Law, for, as discussed, the two are basically the same. The “obligatory” property of the Natural Law is a logical offshoot to the other properties. If the Natural Law is universal because recognizable by all, then it follows that it carries obligations to all. Everyone is required to follow it, for it is engraved in all hearts of men.

¹⁵ Cf. Panizo, 58.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*

C. The Role of Natural Law in Moral Living

After underscoring the essential points of the Natural Law, the next Number (1959) points out its role in the whole schema of moral living:

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.

It is very clear that it is the Natural Law that serves as the foundation of moral living. Moral tenets must then be anchored on the principles of the Natural Law. There must be a clear connection between the specific tenets and the general principles of the Natural Law when deriving the former from the latter. However, the said procedure is not clearly stated in the *Catechism*.¹⁷

One can only surmise of the role of the Magisterium in the interpretation of the principles of the Natural Law. This is stated in Number 2036:

The authority of the Magisterium extends also to the specific precepts of the *natural law*, because their observance, demanded by the Creator, is necessary for salvation. In recalling the prescriptions of the natural law, the Magisterium of the Church exercises an essential part of its prophetic office of proclaiming to men what they truly are and reminding them of what they should do before God.

The importance of the Natural Law in salvation, obviously, is reiterated here. It also explicitly declares that it is the Magisterium that has the authority to apply the general principles of the Natural Law to specific actions or to formulate specific moral

¹⁷ Cf. Theo C.J. Beemer, "The Moral Law" in F. Vosman and K.-W. Merks (Eds.), *Aiming at Happiness: The Moral Teaching in the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 189-190.

guidelines for man. This authority of the Magisterium is also tempered by the reminder of Number 1957, which is discussed above: that the reflections of other cultures on the Natural Law must be heeded to and that sensitivity must be upheld in applying the principles of the Natural Law to some cultures.

Number 1959 also stresses that the Natural Law should become the basis in community building through civil laws. As related to it, Number 1879 illustrates the importance of society to man:

The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation.

Social relations perfect human nature. Thus, it follows that the laws that should govern societies must be patterned after the principles of human nature. Only then can men be truly perfected through his inevitable membership in society.

Number 1960 however cautions everyone who might absolutize and isolate the Natural Law from the whole schema of moral living:

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.” (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.

It is clear here that any man’s interpretation, in itself, of the Natural Law would not necessarily be correct in view of his “fallen nature.” Sin and the limited state of human reason may darken human understanding of the Natural Law.¹⁸ Man then should be open to revelation and to the guidance of the Church

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

in order to attain the true sense of the principles of the Natural Law. Number 2071 is very clear on this:

The commandments of the Decalogue, although accessible to reason alone, have been revealed. To attain a complete and certain understanding of the requirements of the natural law, sinful humanity needed this revelation. A full explanation of the commandments of the Decalogue became necessary in the state of sin because the light of reason was obscured and the will had gone astray. (St. Bonaventure) We know God's commandments through the divine revelation proposed to us in the Church, and through the voice of moral conscience.

That the Decalogue expresses the main precepts of the Natural Law is already discussed. The last point of the Number that moral conscience is a way of knowing and applying the Natural Law in one's own moral decisions needs to be emphasized. It is through his conscience that man can "own" the precepts of the Natural Law.¹⁹

Some Final Notes

Truly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* presentation of the subject of the Natural Law is a reflection of how it discusses the Catholic faith: it focuses only on the fundamentals. The basics of the Natural Law are encapsulated in the said document. The main tenets on the subject, particularly those of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the accepted properties of the subject are all at hand in the document.

This does not mean however that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has said it all. On the contrary, it is still open to much-needed clarifications in some areas. One specific spot, as mentioned above, would be the procedure of deriving the particular moral tenets from the general principles of the Natural Law, for, as the *Catechism* implies, the application of the Natural Law to concrete actions is varied (Number 1957).

¹⁹ Cf. Panizo, 64.

Theologians and philosophers alike should dwell into this area. To add to what are already available, they may formulate guidelines on how this application should be carried out. They should likewise be willing to engage in dialogues with other thinkers with different guidelines for a consensus to be achieved. There should be a uniform set of guidelines to really reflect the universality of the Natural Law.

The uniform set of guidelines would be a support to the Church's Magisterium in justifying its conclusions based on the Natural Law. At least, the Magisterium would have a solid basis, a product of a consensus, to rely on, lest it would be accused of relying on supreme authority in its declarations on morals, which happens most often than not. □