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Much of the moral teaching of the Catholic Church centers about what is called the natural law. Too few people have a clear idea of what this means. We hope this will help many to understand.

WHAT IS THE "NATURAL LAW?"

DONALD F. MILLER, C.SS.R.

Have you ever been perplexed, perhaps even frustrated, when, in answer to your question about the morality of a certain action, you were brushed off quickly with this reply: "Oh, that can never be lawful under any circumstances because it is contrary to the natural law?" Have you felt like saying, perhaps more loudly than necessary, "What is this natural law?" Or, "By what right do you close the door to all argument by that simple phrase, *the natural law?*"

If such questions have bothered you, or even if you have merely wondered about the subject-matter involved, this pamphlet is for you.

Few topics are of more importance, and and few enter more often into discussions by priests and Catholic authorities on specific problems of right and wrong. Consider a few examples:

1. Irreligious psychiatrists sometimes recommend to frustrated persons under their care that they relieve their tensions by indulging in certain forms of sex-conduct, outside of and contrary to the purposes of marriage. Informed Catholics always say that this is immoral advice, because all forms of impurity are contrary to the natural law.

2. Irreligious physicians sometimes recommend to a husband or wife that direct sterilization be submitted to as the only solution to acute problems they face in marriage. All Catholic authorities say that to act upon such advice would be a mortal sin because direct sterilization is contrary to the natural law.

3. Wives and husbands sometimes feel that they have a dozen arguments for

justifying the practice of contraception. Yet any priest whom they may ask about this will invariably answer that no argument justifies birth-prevention because it is contrary to the natural law.

4. Even so-called mercy-killing or euthanasia, that is, putting the old and incurably ill out of their misery by painless murder, has its advocates today. All Catholic authorities say that it is viciously immoral because it is contrary to the natural law.

Surely it is important that all Catholics, and all thinking people, be able to go a step farther and explain why the natural law is credited with making certain actions universally and unchangeably wrong. This explanation is intended to be a help toward that end. It will require a bit of concentration, but who has ever learned anything of value without mental labor pains? It will consider: I. Laws in general. II. The natural law in particular. III. Examples of the natural law. IV. The need of authority to guard the natural law.

I. LAWS IN GENERAL

A law in general, as it applies to human beings, is defined as a rule and measure of actions to be performed or to be omitted, made known in some way to the practical reason of man as related to his own good and the common good of all by one who has authority over subjects and power to enforce the just laws he imposes. That is a long definition, but every element in it is important. Broken up into simple terms, the elements are these: A law 1) directs a person's actions toward what is good for him and the community; 2) it has been made known to him in some way; 3) it comes from one who has care and authority over a community; 4) it can be enforced by the one who made it.

While this definition can be applied to all laws, human and divine, it surely applies most clearly to God's laws. God is pre-eminently the One Who has care and authority over all human beings, as is clear from the fact that He created them out of nothing. He knows what is good and nec-

essary for them to reach the end for which He made them. He must express His will for them in a definite way, and that way is through laws.

It should be noted here, however, that the idea of law is not something that applies to human beings alone. There is a wider sense in which the term may be used. The widest sense is in respect to what is called the eternal law. This is the all-embracing plan or rule according to which God governs the whole universe which He has created. In the eternal law of God are included the laws governing the sun and moon and stars; the tides of the seas and the seasons of the year on earth; the chemicals and minerals and plants and animals to be found on earth. These things have no intelligence with which to know God's law; they obey it by a compulsion placed in their nature when it was created by God.

There are many things about the eternal law of God, that is, the manner in which He rules the whole universe toward the

ends for which He created it, that man cannot know. He cannot know, for example, how God will use accidental happenings, even tragic happenings, to fill out part of His over-all plan. But a part of the eternal law of God governs all such things.

When it comes, however, to what is necessary for man to know in order that he may reach his own destiny, God is bound by His own wisdom to reveal His laws to man. He made man intelligent; therefore He must rule man through his intelligence. He does that by making known to man's mind that part of His eternal law which places obligations on the free will that He gave him, that is to work in partnership with his mind.

Now, there are three ways in which God can make known to man that part of His eternal law which is necessary to direct him toward his destiny of eternal happiness.

First, God can speak to man, and tell him certain things that he must do to be saved, which things no man could know

anything about unless God positively spoke of them. When God became man. He issued a certain number of such laws. He said, for example, you must be baptized in order to enter heaven. This, and other laws like it, are called positive divine laws. They come directly from God, and they could not be known without a positive statement of God.

Second, God can speak to man through other human beings to whom He has delegated some of His authority. Thus, fathers and mothers are delegated by God to guide their children toward heaven, and therefore to make rules and laws for them. Rightfully elected or accepted civil officials are delegated by God to direct the citizens of their state toward their temporal welfare, and therefore to make just laws for them. The true Church was delegated by Christ to provide for the spiritual welfare of all His followers, and therefore to make laws for them. All laws made by delegates of God's authority, both in the spiritual and temporal order, become part of the eternal law of God, and a necessary

means for the attainment of the destiny of man.

Third, God can speak to man silently, simply by revealing to his reason laws that He wrote into the very nature of man when He created it. Here we come to what is called "the natural law." This is what we must now look at in more careful detail.



II. THE NATURAL LAW

First of all, let's look at a rather general principle that prepares our minds to understand the natural law.

Anybody who has the intelligence and ability to make or design an object that is to fulfill a certain purpose, writes laws into that object, many of which can be discovered merely by a close examination of the thing. Men can make things, not in the sense in which God creates things out of nothing, but in the sense that they assemble and combine materials into useful instruments, appliances, etc.

For example, the men in Detroit make automobiles. These automobiles have a very specific purpose, namely, to carry people from place to place. Of course the makers put out a book of directions as to how the automobile must be used to fulfill its purpose. But even apart from the rule book, intelligent men can study the make-up of an automobile and learn through such study many of the laws that

must be observed in its use. To be almost stupidly simple, one can thus learn that the steering wheel cannot be used as a brake; that a certain button must be turned or pulled to put on the headlights; that the doors can be opened only by pressing or turning the handle. These and many other laws can be learned by an examination of an automobile, and thus may in a sense be called the natural law of an automobile.

In exactly the same way it is possible for man to see or to learn many of the laws that God imposed upon his own nature when He created it. Only it is much more important that he grasp and keep these laws than that he learn what laws are to be kept in order to keep an automobile running. Man is immortal. His destiny or purpose is to be happy forever in heaven. Whatever laws God fixed into his nature and made intelligible by his reason have a definite relationship to his eternal happiness.

There are, then, two marks of the natural law through which God decreed that

man would be directed toward his eternal happiness. The first is that it can be grasped by his intelligence; the second is that the evidence for it is built into the nature of man, so that by studying himself, man can know the primary and fundamental principles or laws by which God expects him to live.



III. EXAMPLES OF THE NATURAL LAW

Just as in examining the parts of an automobile or a watch or a washing machine or anything else, so in observing human nature one basic truth can be seen to underlie all the specific rulings of the natural law. It is this: any part of a thing that was clearly given a necessary purpose by the maker of the thing, must be used in accord with that purpose, if the whole thing is to attain its end.

Keep the analogy of the automobile in mind. You discover by studying it that the gas tank was put into it for the necessary purpose of holding gasoline. Pour water or oil or milk into that gas tank, and the car will never budge an inch; it cannot fulfill its purpose.

So, on a much higher level, and with more serious, indeed eternal, consequences at stake, the parts or powers or faculties of man clearly designed by His Creator for necessary purposes must not be diverted

from those purposes to something else. If any one of them is so diverted, the whole man is turned in the wrong direction, away from his real, eternal destiny, just as the automobile cannot possibly run with water in the gas tank.

What are some of these necessary purposes attached to parts or powers or faculties created in man? Take these three simple examples: the necessary purpose of speech, the necessary purpose of sex, the necessary purposes of life itself.

1. Clearly the necessary purpose of the power of speech, which God made part of man's nature, is to make possible honest business transactions, confident human co-operation, solid family and social life among human beings. These ends can be attained only if speech is used for telling the truth. If direct lying were ever permissible, then its very possibility would poison all human relations. Thus the very nature of the power of speech reveals God's voice, or the natural law, as saying: "Thou shalt not lie."

2. Clearly the powers of sex designed in human nature by God have one essential and necessary purpose. It is that of continuing the human race in the proper manner. It is obvious to reason that children can be properly born and reared only in the enduring state of marriage. In marriage the use of sex becomes good, virtuous, meritorious, even when children may not or cannot be conceived, so long as no direct action is taken to evade the necessary purpose of sex relations. On the same ground, any deliberate indulgence in sex actions or pleasure outside of marriage is contrary to the purpose God assigned to sex and therefore seriously wrong. This is a natural, therefore universal and unchangeable law.

3. Clearly God gives life to every human being whom He creates that he may use it, and every minute of it that God gives, to earn his eternal happiness with God. It is absolutely contrary to this purpose to cut short one's life by suicide, or to take unjustly the life of someone else. It is even contrary to this purpose seriously to multi-

late oneself, to deprive oneself of any important bodily part or power that shares in the whole life given by God, unless a diseased part must be excised to save the life as a whole. That is why direct sterilization is as contrary to the natural law as murder or suicide.

Thus it is with all prescriptions of the natural law. They arise from the perception of a necessary purpose attached to something that God made a part of human nature. Why are these laws so fixed and rigid and unchangeable? Just because they are attached irrevocably to human nature. God does not change the nature of things, once He has created them for a certain purpose. So He Himself cannot change the laws He attached to those natures.



IV. THE NEED OF AUTHORITY TO GUARD THE NATURAL LAW

Just about here, someone is apt to be thinking: If, as you say, the natural moral law is so clear to reason, why is it not accepted as you explain it by all men? You say lying, contraception, masturbation, sterilization, etc., are contrary to the natural law and never permissible. How is it that so many people say that some or all of these things, are contrary to no law?

In answer to these questions, two important points must be made.

The first point is that one of the effects of original sin, if not counteracted by the proper spiritual measures, is "a weakening of the intellect," that is, a tendency of the human mind to deny the most elementary truths out of pride, or passion or self-will. Thus there are persons who deny even more basic and obvious truths than that of the binding force of the natural law. Some men deny the existence of God, though the evidence for it is all around them. Some

deny that there is any such thing as truth, or that the human mind can know truth, or even that there is any such thing as a mind or intelligence in human beings. It need not be surprising, then, that such victims of the blindness of original sin will also deny that there is a universal natural law, or certain clear provisions of the natural law.

The second point is that God has gone to great lengths to cure the blindness that results from original sin.

It was for that very purpose that He became man. Through His life and sacrificial death He earned enough grace for mankind to offset, in anyone who accepts His grace, all the weakness of mind and will that were inherited with original sin.

He did more than that. He put much of the natural law into spoken words. We said above that God silently made known the natural law to man by giving him a mind that could study his own nature and perceive the laws imposed upon it by his Creator. But God knew that this would

not be enough. So He also put much of the natural law into words backed by His omnipotent authority. Thus He stated repeatedly to His listeners these dictates of the natural law: "Honor thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

Still more He did. He founded a Church that would be His own continuing voice in reiterating the natural law, and interpreting complex problems that arise in relation to it. The first and most general dictates of the natural law are quite easy for the human mind to grasp. But these first principles, easy to understand, have sometimes to be applied to exceedingly complicated situations. Christ did not want His followers to be left in doubt or confusion about right and wrong in complicated situations. He gave His Church authority to tell them how the natural law applies when their own minds are in doubt.

Sometimes such complications arise from a seeming conflict between two prescriptions of the natural law. For example, lying is clearly against the natural law. At the same time revealing secrets that would be harmful to others is also against the natural law. Thus a lie must not be told, and at the same time the truth must not be told. The Church, through her moral teachers, and sometimes by official declarations, clarifies the natural law for all her members in difficult matters of this kind.

But when a certain point of morality is clearly a matter of the natural law, that is, clear to reason as incorporated in the make-up of human beings, then the Church has no authority to make exceptions, or to change the law. She can only reaffirm it over and over; she can only offer motives and graces through which the keeping of the hardest law is made easy.



CONCLUSION

This has been a brief explanation of what lies behind the often made statement: "Such and such an action can never be lawful, and no exceptions can be granted, *because it is against the natural law.*" The natural law can no more be changed than the nature of man can be changed.

Laws that can be changed by the Church, or to which exceptions may be granted by her, are called positive laws. Such laws are not written into human nature; they are made to help people keep the natural and divine law. Such are the laws governing fasting and abstaining on certain days, and before Communion; the laws governing the manner of entering a Christian marriage, etc. The Church can bind her children to these positive laws under pain of mortal sin. But she can also change them to adjust to changing circumstances. But she will never be found changing any part of the natural law.

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