

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

LAW & GRACE

(Catechism nn. 1949-2051)

Natural Law

In this chapter we reflect on the moral law (Catechism n. 1950-1986), on Grace and Justification (n. 1987-2029), and on the Church, as Mother and Teacher (n. 2030-2051). We begin by looking at the ‘Natural Law’(n. 1954-1960).

Living in accordance with Natural Law

In his Encyclical ‘*The Splendour of Truth*’ (*Veritatis Splendor* 1993) Pope John-Paul II writes:

‘The natural law expresses and lays down the purposes, rights and duties, which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person. Therefore this law cannot be thought of as simply a set of norms on the biological level; rather it must be defined as the rational order whereby human beings are called by the Creator to direct and regulate their lives and actions’(n. 50).

As the Pope says, it is not sufficient to examine human nature from a purely physical or biological perspective. One piece of rock is readily replaceable by another piece. Its nature is determined by its physical properties. It is almost the same with a plant, but less true of a family pet. When we come to a human being it is simply untrue. We are members of the one species, and share common characteristics. In other words we share human nature. However, who we are and who we become is significantly the product of decisions made for us and by us. Within certain obvious limits, we are what our choices have made us. Describing our physical, biological structure is not enough. Human nature is the nature of a person. In accordance with the natural law, we can affirm that it is wrong to act against our nature. Care, however, is needed to ensure that when we speak of our nature we are not limiting our thinking to our biology or our physical properties.

The Pope argues from the natural law to speak of behaviour that is of itself and necessarily bad in any and every circumstance:

‘There are kinds of behaviour which can never, in any situation, be a proper response – a response which is in conformity with the dignity of the person’(n. 52).

Quoting from the Second Vatican Council (GS 27), he lists some examples:

‘Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of murder, 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 civilisation they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator.’

Reason does not create values, moral norms, or truth; it discovers them. We must act according to the judgment of reason; and reason must be open to divine enlightenment. As Pope John-Paul II notes:

‘Some have posited a complete sovereignty of reason in the domain of moral norms regarding the right ordering of life in this world’(n. 36).

This ignores the effects of sin upon reason, and the primary submission to God, which is essential to the proper exercise of reason. We are reminded of Jesus’ words:

‘If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free’(John 8:32).

Living in accordance with God’s revealed will

We need to be open to the enlightenment of divine grace if we are to be free from the forces that so easily obscure the working of reason. Many, including Christians, look to the Hebrew Scriptures for guidance in living a moral life (Catechism n. 1961-1964). We will be doing this when we reflect upon the Ten Commandments in the following chapters. When Christians look to the Hebrew Scriptures for guidance, they do so with care, for they recognise that people’s understanding of God’s will prior to Jesus was necessarily imperfect. Paul insists that where observance of the Law (the Torah) comes into conflict with behaviour inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, it is the Law that must give way. In this he is following Jesus who said: ‘It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...’(see Matthew 5). We are advised to read the Torah through Jesus’ eyes and in the light of his life and teaching.

At its best the Law (the Hebrew Torah) instructs us as to what God wants or does not want. This is good in that it demonstrates how sinful our behaviour is when we contradict the Law, and it can bring us to the point of crying out for mercy. But the Law does not give us the power to obey it. Jesus is God’s answer to that cry, and we live a truly moral life by following his example and the promptings of his Spirit, strengthened by his grace. When we act on faith in Jesus we will not contradict what is right in the Law. Rather we will fulfill it and go beyond it in love. The Law is ‘holy, just and good’(Romans 7:12), but it is no substitute for being in communion with Jesus.

Before we look at the light shed on the moral law by the Newer Testament we might recall the following inspiring words from the Psalms:

‘Who will cause us to see good? Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord’(Psalm 4:6).

‘Blessed is the person who walks not in the counsel of the wicked ... but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night’(Psalm 1:1-2).

‘The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes’(Psalm 19:8-9).

‘Who can discern his errors? Cleanse me from hidden faults’(Psalm 19:12).

The Law of Christ

Being written in the light of Jesus' life and teaching, the Newer Testament is a privileged place where we find God's will expressed (Catechism n. 1965-1974). Jesus is God's perfect Word. In Jesus we see who God is and what God wills for us. His disciples saw Jesus as the one who brought the Law to its fulfillment by living to perfection its inspired thrust. The Letter to the Hebrews (8:8-10) quotes the following oracle from the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34, quoted in the Catechism n. 1965):

'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'

Christians believe that Jesus is the one in whom God fulfilled this promise.

The 'law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2) is that the perfection for which we strive is the perfection we see in God: the perfection of love. We are called to love as Jesus loves; to love with his love, which is his gift to us, poured into our hearts by God's Spirit. Texts abound in the Newer Testament that reveal how we are to live as disciples of Jesus. In Paul's Letter to the Romans (12:9-13) we read:

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.'

Precepts and Counsels

Jesus requires of his disciples certain ways of behaving ('precepts'). In other places he invites them to follow his example ('counsels'). The latter are invitations of grace. The Catechism writes:

'The precepts are intended to remove whatever is incompatible with charity. The aim of the counsels is to remove whatever hinders the development of charity, even if it is not contrary to it' (n. 1973).

It goes on to quote from Saint Francis De Sales (*Love of God* 8.6):

'God does not want each person to keep all the counsels, but only those appropriate to the diversity of persons, times, opportunities, and strengths, as charity requires; for it is charity, as queen of all virtues, all commandments, all counsels, and, in short, of all laws and all Christian actions, that gives to all of them their rank, order, time and value' (n. 1974).

Desire for God and Concupiscence

In an earlier chapter we reflected on God drawing everyone to salvation. In *A Rahner Reader* (edited by Gerald A. McCool), Rahner's thought on the matter is summarised:

‘Because of the supernatural existential produced in the human soul by God’s real offer of his grace, the strivings of the human spirit which all people experience are the strivings of elevated nature. Even the non-Christian and the atheist have an experience of grace in the love, the longings, the emptiness, the loneliness, which accompany a genuine loving commitment to real human values. In their fidelity to true human values, despite discouragement and disillusionment, they are serving the “absent God”, whom they experience through his grace, although they cannot find him in the world with which they deal explicitly through their objective concepts.’

It is true, as Saint Augustine says, that our hearts are restless till they rest in God. However, there is in all of us another kind of gravity that attracts us to what is not good for us. The traditional word for this is ‘concupiscence’. In an article entitled ‘*Grace and Concupiscence*’ (Volume 1 of *Theological Investigations*, page 203), Rahner writes:

‘In the course of our self-determination, we undergo the resistance of the nature given prior to freedom, and we never wholly succeed in making all that we are into the reality and the expression of all that we comprehend ourselves to be in the core of our person. There is much in us that always remains in concrete fact somehow impersonal, impenetrable and unilluminated for our existential decision, merely endured and not freely acted out. It is this dualism between person and nature that we call concupiscence in the theological sense.’

Justification and Grace (n. 1987-2029)

God’s grace is working to liberate us from this self-destructive energy so that we might stay in touch with our deepest longings and ‘live to the full’(John 10:10). Paul writes:

‘We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law’(Galatians 2:16).

When we ‘justify’ a text, we ‘ad-just’ it so that the left and right edges are straight. We set it straight. We set it right. When God ‘justifies’ a person, God does something to the person (God adjusts the person) to set him/her in a right relationship with God. In Greek, The verb ‘justify’ and the noun ‘justification’ are based on the word *dikê* which refers to divine order – the will of God as revealed in nature, in history, and in divinely revealed law. Paul’s point is that what we do cannot bring justification. We cannot ‘adjust’ ourselves. For that we must look to Jesus. What matters now is that we open our hearts to Jesus’ love, share Jesus’ faith, and observe the Jewish law only when it is consistent with this faith.

Paul writes to the communities in Rome:

‘Now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe ... They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

Holiness

‘He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus’ (Romans 3:21-26; see Catechism n. 1992).

We must open our hearts to welcome a share in Jesus’ faith, for God does not impose love. Rather, God offers love and awaits our welcome. It is this welcoming of grace that is the essence of faith. Sharing Jesus’ faith is sharing his openness to the Father’s offer of love-communion (see Catechism n. 1993).

Holiness (n. 2012-2016)

The goal of the moral life is to live in full communion with God, the Holy One. We do this by opening our lives to the gift of Jesus’ Spirit, which enables us not only to ‘put on Christ’, but to be totally transformed till we think with his mind and love with his heart. The Second Vatican Council (LG 43) reminds us:

‘The holiness of the Church is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.’

The Catechism (n. 1995) quotes Paul:

‘Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life’ (Romans 6:19, 22).

And again (n. 2012):

‘We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he foreordained he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified’ (Romans 8:28-30).

The Catechism (n. 2011) quotes Therese of Lisieux:

‘After earth’s exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for love of you alone ... In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count what I have done. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish to be clothed, then, in your justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself.’

‘Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father’s goodness.’

The Church, Mother and Teacher (n. 2030-2051)

Once again we quote from Pope John-Paul II’s Encyclical ‘*The Splendour of Truth*’:

‘The Church can never renounce the principle of truth and consistency, whereby she does not agree to call good evil and evil good; she must always be careful not to break the bruised reed or to quench the dimly burning wick’(n. 95).

‘Appropriate allowance is made both for God’s mercy towards the sin of the person who experiences conversion and for the understanding of human weakness. Such understanding never means compromising and falsifying the standard of good and evil in order to adapt it to particular circumstances. It is quite human for the sinner to acknowledge his weakness and to ask mercy for his failings; what is unacceptable is the attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified, without even the need to have recourse to God and his mercy’(n. 104).

The Catechism states:

‘In the work of teaching and applying Christian morality, the Church needs the dedication of pastors, the knowledge of theologians, and the contribution of all Christians and people of good will. Faith and the practice of the Gospel provide each person with an experience of life “in Christ”, who enlightens us and makes us able to evaluate divine and human realities according to the Spirit of God. Thus the Holy Spirit can use the humblest to enlighten the learned and those in the highest positions’(n. 2038).

Pope John-Paul II writes:

‘The life of holiness which is resplendent in so many members of the People of God, humble and often unseen, constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God’s love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord’s law, even in the most difficult situations’(*The Splendour of Truth* n. 107).

The precepts of the Church (n. 2041-2043)

The Catechism repeats the traditional list of so-called ‘precepts of the Church’. The first concerns the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. The Second edition of the Catechism speaks also about ‘resting from those works and activities which could impede such a sanctification of these days.’ In Australia only Christmas Day and the Feast of the Assumption may fall on a week day, the other holy days of obligation have been transferred to the nearest Sunday.

The second precept states the obligation to confess grave sins at least once a year (see Canon 989).

The third obliges Catholics to receive Communion at least once a year during the Easter season (that is, between Ash Wednesday and Trinity Sunday).

The fourth obliges those between 18 and 59 to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On these same days, all over 14 are obliged to abstain from eating meat.

The fifth is to ‘assist with the material needs of the Church, each according to his or her own ability.’

Authenticity

We conclude this chapter with a quote from the Catechism (n. 2044):

‘The fidelity of the baptised is a basic condition for the proclamation of the Gospel and for the Church’s mission in the world. In order that the message of salvation can show the power of its truth and radiance, it must be authenticated by the witness of the life of Christians.’