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# PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Essays on Going Deeper  
as a Catholic

A Catholic Culture Publication

# Practical Theology

## Essays on Going Deeper as a Catholic

by Jeffrey A. Mirus

A faulty understanding of Divine Revelation or Catholic teaching on faith and morals can interfere with our growth in love of God and neighbor and our response to the challenges we face. In this collection of essays written between late 2017 and early 2019,

I have selected those which apply theological principles and insights to the way we understand the world and how we live. Topics range from Original Sin to human dignity, and include (among others) the difference between God's law and mere ideals, the nature of authentic discernment, the character of holiness, the relationship between Church and State, the natural law, models of apologetics, temptation and moral gradualism, and even the incompatibility between trust in Providence and, well, complaining.

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# Introduction: Practical Theology

To me, practical theology refers to the basic theological understanding one ought to have in order to grasp firmly the principles of the Catholic Faith and to make orderly progress in the spiritual life. It is not at all uncommon that a faulty understanding of Divine Revelation or Catholic teaching on faith and morals can interfere with our growth in love of God and neighbor and our proper response to the challenges of our culture and our personal lives.

Among the essays I posted on CatholicCulture.org between January of 2017 and March of 2019, I have selected for this collection those which attempt to apply important theological principles and insights to the way we understand the world and how we live. Topics range from Original Sin to human dignity, and include our reception of Revelation, the difference between God's law and mere ideals, the problem of the death penalty, the nature of authentic discernment, the relationship between Church and State, the character of holiness, the natural law, models of apologetics, God's delicacy in dealing with us, temptation and moral gradualism, and even the incompatibility between trust in Providence and, well, *complaining*.

When we can learn to think properly about key issues in the spiritual moral life, we suddenly understand the difference between good and bad solutions to the challenges we face.

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# Grace under fire: How a false gradualism undermines resistance to temptation

There has been much talk of “gradualism” over the past generation or two, and most of it has been rather foolish. Whenever the term is used to describe the normal process by which a person grows in spiritual understanding, in the love of God, and in virtue, gradualism is a descriptive term which essentially states the obvious. Good spiritual counselors will take careful note of a person’s spiritual maturity, and tailor their advice so it is suitable to that person’s understanding and commitment, seeking to prompt growth without breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoldering wick (Is 42:3).

But insofar as the term is used to suggest that virtue consists in doing “the best we can” even though we neither recognize nor accept the “ideal” way of life proposed in the Gospel, gradualism distorts the will of God and undermines spiritual progress. This abuse of the term has been particularly notable in considering the spiritual health of those in irregular marriages. As Pope St. John Paul II put it in his 1981 apostolic exhortation [Familiaris Consortio](#):

Married people too are called upon to progress unceasingly in their moral life with the support of a sincere and active desire to gain ever better knowledge of the values enshrined in and fostered by the law of God. They must also be supported by an upright and generous willingness to embody these values in their concrete decisions. They cannot, however, look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: They must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy. “And so what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law,’ as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations. In God’s plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God’s command with serene confidence in God’s grace and in his or her own will.” [ *Familiaris Consortio*, #34]

Pope Francis also touched on this theme in his own apostolic exhortation [Amoris](#)

**Laetitia.** A growing number of pastoral approaches to those in irregular marriages have obscured the necessary distinctions, tending toward precisely the gradualism of the law against which Pope John Paul II warned. At times Pope Francis himself has seemed to approve such abuses. In the actual text, however, Pope Francis did reiterate what his predecessor had said:

What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which “guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow. Given that gradualness is not in the law itself (*cf. Familiaris Consortio*, 34), this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church. For this discernment to happen, the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it.” [*Amoris Laetitia*, #300]

The controversy surrounding *Amoris Laetitia* hinges on whether Pope Francis succeeded in articulating forms of pastoral accompaniment which do not slip into the proscribed gradualism of the law. At the heart of the conflict is the widespread perception that admission to Communion, for those who remain in irregular marriages without living as brother and sister, is tantamount to embracing gradualism of the law. This problem arises precisely because it undermines or denies Pope St. John Paul II’s point, quoted above, that “all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God’s command with serene confidence in God’s grace and in his or her own will.”

In other words, if progress in holiness can occur only when the person “is able to respond to God’s command with serene confidence in God’s grace”, then the failure to commit oneself to living in accordance with God’s command is a refusal to undertake the necessary progress. Admission to Communion would suggest, therefore, that this refusal is recognized as morally good (even if not ideal) because “it is the best the person can do”. If that is the reasoning, then we have entered once again into gradualism of the law, through the back door.

## **An examination of temptation**

I believe it will be helpful at this point to consider the Catholic understanding of temptation. The line of reasoning I just mentioned could be sound only under one of two possible conditions: Either temptation is not morally significant, or God does not necessarily make available to those who are tempted the grace necessary to resist and ultimately overcome that temptation.

Since temptation is, by its very definition, an invitation to sin, reason indicates that it is self-evidently morally significant. If we turn to Scripture, we will realize not only that it is morally significant according to reason, but that Our Lord has directly revealed it to be of very great moral significance indeed.

This is evident throughout the gospels. “Woe to the world for temptations to sin!” says Our Lord and Savior. “For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes” (Mt 18:7, *cf.* Lk 17:1). In His own agony of temptation, Our Lord also demonstrated the proper response to temptation: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mt 26:39; *cf.* Mk 14:36). He cautioned his followers very strongly on this point: “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:40-41; *cf.* Mk 14:37-38).

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul lists the instances in the Old Testament in which God punished the unfaithful even among His chosen people. Consider the lesson he draws for Christians:

We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the age has come.

Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. [1 Cor 10:8-12]

Finally, in the letter to the Hebrews, the writer refers to the judgment of the Holy Spirit: “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. . . . I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest.” The sacred author concludes: “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Heb 3:12).

## The availability of God's help

So much, then, for the moral seriousness of temptation. Now, what of the suggestion that God does not always help those who are tempted? If this is true, then the argument in favor of “the best we can do” would carry considerable weight. But if it is false, then the sinner cannot be commended for the virtue of doing his best if he is still embroiled in the same sin—as if he has done something good even though it falls short of the “ideal”. If temptation is spiritually significant and God always offers the help we need to overcome it, then gradualism of the law is ruled out absolutely.

In fact, the willingness of God to provide all the necessary help is a constant theme in the New Testament. Our Lord even taught us to ask the Father to “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil”. As He explained, we can always rely on God's grace:

And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! [Lk 11:9-13; *cf.* Mt 7:7-11]

St. Paul teaches us very specifically that “no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). A strong theme in both St. Paul's letters and the Letter to the Hebrews is Our Lord's ability to understand human temptation and weakness and to help us in our need: “For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” (Heb 2:18). Clearly we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,” the sacred author concludes, “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16).

Gradualism of the law depends on a denial either of God's power or of His love, for it assumes it is not our fault if we fail to stop sinning, and so anything positive within this sinful situation renders it good in its own right, even if it is short of the ideal. The argument is always some form of “we can only do so much on our own”, without recognizing that we are “on our own” only through our own decision to exclude God.

This assessment is really just another temptation. We will see this very clearly if we permit St. James to have the last word:

Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. [Jas 1:12-16]

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## Is there a “morality gap” in the way Pope Francis presents his favorite themes?

I find myself wondering whether Pope Francis does not sometimes undermine his own favorite themes, such as Divine mercy and Christian unity, by his obvious reluctance to articulate their significant moral character. I consider this an important question because the Pope’s key themes are strikingly beautiful, yet without adverting clearly to the moral demands of new life in Christ, Catholic solidarity can be reduced to lip service.

Let me refer to two of yesterday’s news stories to explain what I mean. In the first, we find Francis preaching once again [against a “rigid” focus on the Commandments](#). It is possible, we know, to engage in an external observance of the Commandments without being motivated by love. Such “rigidity” can seriously interfere with both receiving and offering mercy. Unfortunately, the terms “rigid” and “rigidity” carry a great deal of cultural baggage. Over the past generation or two, these terms have been used as slurs by Modernists to dismiss both the value of orthodoxy and the seriousness of sin.

In the sort of barren spirituality that arises from true rigidity, a person falls into the trap of fulfilling the letter of the law as if mere punctiliousness is an adequate foundation for a vibrant relationship with God. It is not, but I would add that in our time this would seem to be the least of our worries. In the first half of the twentieth century, before Western culture was largely dissolved by the sexual revolution, there was a good deal more of what we call living the Faith “prescriptively”, which is closely connected to the problem of rigidity. This was at least partially triggered by cultural pressure. American culture, for example, expected outward adherence to most of the moral requirements of Christianity, and it was easy for this veneer of Christian respectability to become a spiritual stopping point.

Perhaps the most common spiritual question raised during this period was this: What outward behavior do I have to follow to be an acceptable Catholic? Or, to put it in terms altogether too common in the Church of the 1950s (and here I raise my own hand), “What do I have to do to make it to purgatory?” While not universal, neither is this a caricature of the spiritual weakness of the Church before 1960. It goes far to explain why changes in rubrics and rules triggered a nearly instantaneous and wholesale abandonment of Catholic piety, just as soon as the larger culture no longer cared.

This problem actually lies quite close to rigidity, which typically shows a greater awareness of religious law and then condemns those who do not maintain the same outward signs of superior devotion. But things have changed a great deal since then. Modern culture has divorced itself from Christian mores in nearly every respect. By those outside of the Church (and sometimes by people within the Church who should know better), Catholics are constantly urged to stop judging behaviors which were formerly understood to be seriously immoral. The question is no longer, “How do I conform to what is expected of me?” but instead, “How do I find the moral strength to live as a sign of contradiction?” Even in rare instances where rigidity exists today among Catholics, it will nearly always be in this counter-cultural context.

We must understand that it takes both perception and courage just to frame this new question. This means it is rarely asked unless a person has a legitimate and powerful motive for doing so. But where there is no socio-cultural incentive, by far the most common motive must necessarily be *love of God*. Clearly, the real problem of “rigidity” is now primarily found in the dominant culture’s insistence that those who question contemporary secular moral values must be psychologically ill. Indeed, this is a fairly clear case of a psychological defense mechanism called “projection”. Those who rigidly adhere to the cultural code of acceptability project onto others what they suffer from themselves: Thus they insist that all those who choose the harder path of resistance suffer from “rigidity”.

## Ecumenism

Elsewhere in the news yesterday, we found Pope Francis urging us to use the [anniversary of the Protestant Reformation as an opportunity](#) to take a further step toward Christian unity. Once again, we see a certain truth here for, indeed, *everything* that reminds us of Christian divisions ought to spur us to greater efforts toward Christian unity. At the same time, however, Pope Francis has apparently chosen not to address the ever-widening moral gap between Catholics and other Christian groups.

Christian unity is not possible except among those who take Our Lord’s invitation to new life seriously, and the first visible sign of this new life, as well as the strongest proof of spiritual growth, is the *willingness to conform ourselves to God’s will*. It is necessary always to recall Our Lord’s very specific teaching on this point, perhaps expressed most clearly in the seventh chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. I recommend the entire chapter, but please consider at least this excerpted sequence of instructions:

Enter by the narrow gate...for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to

life.... Beware of false prophets.... You will know them by their fruits.... Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.... And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers." Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock.... And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Now, because of the tremendous power of secular culture over the minds of those who have not really opened themselves to the grace of Jesus Christ, one "Christian" group after another has been busy changing its moral teachings to accommodate contraception, divorce, extra-marital sex, homosexuality, gender ideology, gay marriage, abortion, euthanasia and many other gross violations of the Divine Law. Our culture tells us these things are not nearly as important as, for example, a failure to assist the poor. But in fact these are seriously selfish behaviors through which we reject our Creator, strike at the very heart of what it means to be human, undermine the family, and destroy the social order.

In our day, these are very clearly the signs of Mammon or the Beast. They are certainly not the signs of Jesus Christ and His Church. Our refusal to acknowledge God's will in such things renders Christian unity, or any form of solidarity with others, absurd. We find ourselves joining hands and saying "Lord, Lord" without attending at all to the strongly counter-cultural behavior which is demanded—yes, I use the term advisedly, *demanded*—of the children of God. God's mercy consists not in abrogating the moral law but in inviting us into an ever larger share of His own life so that we become a new creation, victorious in Christ over sin and death.

### **An unacceptable moral gap**

There is no question that some may find themselves trapped in sin at least partly because they do not recognize, or have never experienced, Divine love. In these situations, mercy is the key to unlocking the heart. Certainly, if in our ecumenical efforts and in our merciful attitude toward sinners, we encounter the sort of genuine commitment to God's will that expresses itself through the tears and renewed efforts which accompany every moral lapse, then no objection ought to be made to our joyful collaboration with these brothers and sisters in Christ.

But if we run up against an unwillingness to go beyond saying "Lord, Lord" in order

to begin to “do the will of my Father in heaven”—and if we do not find in this or that group of men and women any tendency, with respect to the sins praised by our particular culture, to submit themselves to anything beyond the rules of fashion, then our grandiose proclamations of mercy, welcome and unity will prove in the event to be a betrayal of Christ and the Church.

In such a case, we are in a sense living prescriptively again. We are paying mere lip service to a cultural expectation. We may confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, but we refuse to believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead (Rm 10:9). We remain closed to mercy because we refuse to admit the power of God. It is just this that creates the astonishing moral gap in too many facile statements about rigidity, and about mercy, and about Christian unity. But this gap cannot be ignored if we are truly struggling to please God.

Counter-cultural morality is the first measure of true commitment. Its normal cause is not rigidity but a desire to respond to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. Yes, it is true that spiritual progress is proved by love. But love is proved only by incurring serious moral costs—and paying them with joy.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=709>

# On the role of the Holy Spirit in papal elections

A common question among Catholics today is: “What was the Holy Spirit doing during the conclave that elected Jorge Bergoglio as Pope Francis?” The answer, of course, is that the Holy Spirit was doing what He is always doing, prompting all involved to cast their votes for the good of the Church, just as He has prompted all involved to form a proper understanding of the good of the Church. But the Holy Spirit does not choose the pope; that is left to the vagaries of men, and the vagaries of their response to grace.

In other words, the Holy Spirit does not arrange the votes so that the best possible candidate is elected. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the choice will reflect God’s active will, though the choice of a particular man as pope obviously fits within God’s permissive will. To put the matter succinctly, the promptings of the Holy Spirit are as certainly real as they are frequently resisted.

Happily, the Catholic Church enjoys some Divine guarantees, but they are not numerous. Christ promised to be with the Church to the end of time, and that the gates of hell would not prevail against her. This means essentially that the Holy Spirit will not permit the Church’s Divine constitution to be lost (such as the disappearance of the Catholic hierarchy), that the fullness of all the means of salvation will always be available in the Church, that the Church’s sacraments will always be powerful sources of grace, that the Church’s Magisterial teachings will be completely free from error, and that the Church will remain the mystical body of Christ under the headship of Our Lord Himself, as represented here on earth by His Vicar, the successor of Peter.

## **Electoral Pitfalls**

But again, the Holy Spirit does not guarantee that the most desirable candidate will be elected pope. Nor does He prevent the electors (currently members of the College of Cardinals below the age of 80) from succumbing to other influences: Ignorance, falsehood, personal partiality, ill-conceived goals, and temptations of every kind, including those that are political and financial. There have been periods in Church history in which the papal office was essentially bought and sold through the influence of powerful political leaders or powerful families.

Among the weaknesses at work among the cardinal electors, one factor that is always

present is ignorance. The cardinals, chosen from around the world, cannot in most cases get to know each other well. They must often vote based on incomplete or even incorrect impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of the various candidates (each other). They will often vote for a particular candidate based on assumptions about his interests and abilities which turn out to be incorrect. Many cardinals will rely primarily on the impressions and advice of others in whom, wisely or unwisely, they place their trust.

All of this is historically obvious, considering the many deficient men who have been elected to the papacy over the centuries. A great number of popes have been singularly holy (81 have been canonized and there are causes for canonization for fourteen others), but among the 171 who have not been canonized there have been some who did not work out so well, owing either to circumstances beyond their control or to their own weaknesses and sins. A few examples:

- **Pope Liberius (352-356)**: Under political and theological pressure from Arians, Pope Liberius condemned the leader of the orthodox, St. Athanasius. To get off the hook, he also signed an equivocal statement that could be interpreted in either an Arian or a Catholic sense. He did endure exile with some courage, but he was the first pope after St. Peter who was never recognized as a saint.
- **Pope Stephen VI (VII) (ca. 896-897)**: Also living in a period of political turmoil and influence in the Church, Pope Stephen had the body of one of his predecessors (Pope Formosus) exhumed and put on trial. Then he condemned him, stripped the corpse of its vestments, cut off two of its fingers, and threw the body in the Tiber. (The discrepancy in numbering the popes named Stephen has arisen because six men have been elected and taken the name of Stephen, but only five of them actually lived long enough to serve as Pope. Numbers were not used until the tenth century.)
- **Pope St. Celestine V (1294)**: This holy monk was an inept administrator. He resigned as Pope amid turmoil six months after his election.
- **Pope John XXII (1316-1334)**: One of the ill-fated Avignon popes, John XXII expressed the false opinion in sermons and letters that those who were saved did not enjoy the beatific vision until after the final judgment. However, he did not teach this magisterially, and later he retracted his opinion.
- **Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503)**: This was the famous Borgia pope, elected through the influence of a powerful Italian family, and guilty of both nepotism

and fathering children by his mistress. Other popes elected in the Renaissance period indulged in various forms of opulence and/or conducted wars to further their interests. Serious reform did not set in until Pope Paul III called what would become the Council of Trent, the decisions of which were implemented by Pope St. Pius V (1566-1572).

- **Pope John Paul I (1978):** We may presume it was not his fault, but the first John Paul died after a papacy of just 33 days. Here, perhaps, we can get an inkling of Divine Providence at work: The most memorable things about him were his smile and his attraction to the works of Mark Twain, and his death cleared the way for the election of Pope St. John Paul II at an extraordinarily dangerous time in Catholic history.

More popes could be listed; the point is simply to illustrate that there are no guarantees.

## Divine Providence

Of course, Divine Providence is at work in everything that happens in both the Church and the world. We know that nothing occurs without at least the permissive will of God, who is so far above us in capacity that He has no difficulty at all in turning everything to His ultimate purposes. Being outside of time, God sees everything “at once”, so to speak. He is not confused or thrown for a loop; nor does He have to “readjust”. Rather, His Providence encompasses everything according to His own plan, without at all impeding human freedom.

We seldom recognize how it is that bad things serve God’s purposes, but we are not completely ignorant either. We know that present evils are not somehow good because they are encompassed by Providence, and we can often see in our own lives how what is bad can serve His purpose. This last point is true because each thing that affects us provides a fresh occasion to respond in a way that increases our union with God. Often, indeed, hardship and loss can push us in this direction more easily than a smooth ride. So too can our very sins. I refer again, as I do so often, to St. Paul’s words to the Romans: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (8:28).

Finally, we must remember that the Holy Spirit is continuously active and certainly knows what He is doing—even when His graces are refused. Sometimes we can see a pattern, or at least imagine a good outcome, but without proclaiming it as certain. Just as the quick death of John Paul I cleared the way for the election of one of the greatest

popes in history, it is also possible that our present cardinals will regard the current pontificate as a frightening object lesson in allowing Christainity to serve the secular values of the declining West.

First-hand experience of this pontificate may prove to be a powerful secondary cause. Will the next conclave turn to the young and vibrant churches? Will the cardinals call the successor to Pope Francis out of Africa? Only God knows. But the Holy Spirit does not tire, nor does Christian hope disappoint. Our job is to pray, work and trust.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1454>

## Understanding Mercy—with pointers from the Apostolic Penitentiary

It's one of those little things that make all the difference. Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, the head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, addressed students in a course on the internal forum following the Jubilee of Mercy. Here is the last sentence of our brief [news story](#):

Cardinal Piacenza offered three post-jubilee pastoral perspectives: the importance of “missionary conversion,” a fidelity that embraces the works of charity, and “formation”, since “mercy without reason risks being reduced to sentimental experience.”

For those unfamiliar with this Vatican office, the Apostolic Penitentiary is one of three tribunals of the Curia, a tribunal of mercy responsible for key issues relating to the forgiveness of sins. These include absolution of automatic excommunications (*latae sententiae*) that are reserved to the Holy See, dispensation of sacramental impediments reserved to the Holy See, and the issuance and governance of indulgences. The head of the Penitentiary, currently Cardinal Piacenza, is called the Major Penitentiary. By virtue of his position (so that he can continue to do his job), he is one of just three cardinal electors who are allowed to communicate with those outside the conclave during a papal election. This is a powerful symbol of the reality that the Church's exercise of mercy is not suspended even when there is no pope.

In his comments yesterday, Cardinal Piacenza stressed three objectives for growth in mercy which we can immediately recognize as essential for both the renewal of the Church and the growth of each and every soul in holiness:

- **Missionary Conversion:** This refers to our willingness to show genuine mercy through what is indispensable, namely public witness to Christ. It is out of fashion in the modern secular world, being regarded either as “bad form” or a punishable offense. There are two sides to this coin of missionary conversion: We who already possess the faith must have the conviction and courage to announce and witness to it; and we must also attempt to stimulate a genuinely missionary faith in others, including new converts. Without this, true mercy cannot grow and spread.

- **Charitable Fidelity:** This subtitle will fail to capture the meaning if it is construed as hinting that the faithful are typically uncharitable. But there is always that danger; moreover, this common slur keeps the faithful off balance when used against them by the unfaithful—those who regard themselves as virtuous in their “openness”. The slur is certainly categorically unjust, yet we know that it is possible to identify goodness or righteousness with orthodoxy in the narrowest sense. That is a grave mistake. Genuine orthodoxy, as Chesterton once observed, is authentic fidelity. It involves not just believing the right things, but living them.
- **Formation:** Without casting any particular stones, good Christians would have to be blind and deaf not to realize that the characteristic shortcoming of contemporary spiritual culture is its emphasis on God’s love and mercy without explaining what it is for. Our era is particularly weak at linking mercy with personal transformation in Christ, just as it avoids linking spiritual freedom with the refusal to sin. On all sides we find charlatans offering cheap grace, discounted through dilution, forgetting that the whole point of forgiving sins is to draw us so close to God that we live in Him, relying on His strength to recognize and avoid sin, and learning to love with His love.

### So much to internalize

It is as if Cardinal Piacenza is urging us, in the wake of Pope Francis’ marvelous emphasis on the mercy of God, not to kid ourselves. Questions: (1) Do we hide behind conventions to avoid the adverse consequences—or perhaps merely the embarrassment—of announcing and witnessing to Christ and His Church? (2) Do we consider our job done when we profess to believe everything that the Catholic Church teaches, forgetting our frequent failures to put these things into practice through love? (3) Do we fail to help others to understand the personal commitment required for the mercy of God to achieve the ends for which He has bestowed it—with our lives, not just our words?

Let us once again suppose—but merely for simplicity—that there are two kinds of people in the world. If so, then both kinds repeatedly fail in mercy in their own ways. The stock conservative believes what the world hates, and so fails to bear witness, while the stock liberal bears witness not to Christ but to what the world loves. The stereotypical conservative stresses the profession of faith but lets the poor suffer where they lie, while the stereotypical liberal emphasizes concern for the downtrodden, but always through

programs which cannot touch the heart and soul. Finally, the caricatured conservative tells people they must change without embracing them in love, while the caricatured liberal speaks always of love while refusing to understand that the meaning of love is determined by God, not by any culture, let alone the sick culture of secular modernity.

Cardinal Piacenza has, in a few simple sentences, given us the challenge of a lifetime. It is almost as if he has found God's mercy being constantly kicked around on the floor of a dirty house, and has put it back on the lampstand—"that those who enter," as Our Lord said, "may see the light" (Lk 11:33).

In Luke's gospel we discover another relevant passage as well:

[Y]ou will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.... [Lk 1:76-9]

These inspired words were spoken by Zechariah over his infant son, the greatest man ever born of woman. The meaning of Cardinal Piacenza's lesson can only be that both ends of this prophetic sentence have a wider application. They apply also to you and me.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1460>

## This delicate lover: God rarely embraces us by force

In thinking about Our Lord's passion, death and resurrection this year, I was struck by the extraordinary delicacy of God's efforts to make us obedient to His will. I don't mean to say that the crucifixion was particularly "delicate" or that His miracles should have been more stupendous. But God has a habit of quietly reaffirming His love for us, rather than "forcing" our love for Him.

The reason may be obvious. It is exactly the same reason that God allows evil so much latitude in His Providence. Indeed, this is a perennial complaint against the very idea of God—that if God existed, He could not possibly be idle in the face of such great suffering and evil. Catholics typically respond to this argument by pointing out that God has created us for love, and that it is in the very nature of love to depend on freedom—to depend on a free personal decision and effort to put the other ahead of the self. An offer of love always includes the possibility of both evil and suffering.

The same inescapable logic governs God's refusal to act in ways which makes it impossible for us to deny His active presence in our lives. After all, Our Lord could have announced a program something like this:

I will instruct you over a period of three days. On the first day, I will reverse the properties of earth and sea so that you suddenly find yourselves treading water while your boats are stuck fast on dry land. But just before you drown, I will change things back. On the second day, I will strike every person with an extraordinarily painful illness. But just before you give up and attempt to commit suicide, I will heal you. On the third day, I will make it impossible for you to complete any ordinary task without asking for my help. But when you ask for my help, the task will become immediately both simple and satisfying. Then I will line you all up between a pit of flames and a land flowing with milk and honey and give you the choice of leaping into the flames or acknowledging that I am the LORD.

What would we do in response to this program? The vast majority of us would acknowledge God, enter into this earthly paradise, and then immediately look for ways to pursue whatever illicit desires we hold dear. A small number would choose the flames out of sheer pride, refusing to submit themselves to God. An even smaller

number—perhaps actually the very best of us all—would say to God as they would say to a tyrant: Kill me if you like, but I will not permit my will to be determined by mere power.

But how many would discern God's love, and respond in kind?

### **Delicate Miracles**

The vast majority of us have not personally witnessed miracles which admit of no other explanation. Almost anything in this line that we witness can be ascribed to unusual circumstances, causes that we do not yet understand, mere chance, or even the failure of our own senses to give us an honest report. Moreover, it is symptomatic of both Christianity and Judaism that the most spectacular miracles tend to have been witnessed in other times and places, a factor that dramatically reduces the credibility we ascribe to those who have reported them. For these reasons, we recognize only too well that we can always find a reason to deny that Divine agency is at work. Indeed, many of us are prone to trust our own experience of the absence of God—even if it is we ourselves who have driven Him away—more than we trust the testimony of others concerning His Presence.

In other words, the miraculous rarely compels our assent. Moreover, if it did compel our assent, most of us would respond to miracles simply because we had no choice. More often than not, ours would be a surly and external compliance, lacking entirely in the love which leads us to holiness as we share more and more in the life of God.

Surely this is the reason that Our Lord typically leads us by small steps, employing tiny miracles of grace—little seeds which almost invisibly take root in our souls and grow, enabling us to recognize God because we have received His love, and then learning gradually to make this love our own so that we can love Him in return. The mystery of human freedom lies at the heart of this interaction with grace. We find ourselves prompted in delicate ways, and our will has the freedom to instruct the intellect to rationalize, spinning out reasons to reject any given overture. But if we raise no barrier, more grace is given to enable us to carry through. By many little steps, then—frequently by many little and *faltering steps*—we learn how to recognize and respond to grace.

### **Habitual grace**

Grace is synonymous with love. If we are docile to grace, we become habituated to it. For most of us this is a long and relatively slow process. The miracles of which we have heard, and the various motives of credibility with which we are familiar, serve us well as reasons to stay on track, confirming us against occasional doubts, strengthening the

rational grounds of our Faith, and teaching us, as St. Peter put it, to frame an answer to those who question the hope that is in us (1 Pet 3:15). But if we look back, we are unlikely to find any absolutely decisive moment in which we were *compelled* to believe. What we find instead is a growing awareness, often through many struggles, of the simple and very quiet fact that God is at work within us.

Consider how the Lord instructed the great prophet Elijah when he fled for his life, hiding himself in a cave:

And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?... Go, return on your way." [1 Kgs 19:11-15]

Our Lord and Savior rarely touches us with gales, or earthquakes or fires which are manifestly from His own hand. He will of course permit us to be cured of our hubris through suffering. But He always prefers something more intimate. The master of sweet somethings, He prefers to reveal His astonishingly delicate Presence in our hearts.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1474>

# Original Sin: What is it really and why does it matter?

I had a very interesting exchange over the weekend with a man who raised two important questions: First, does the Church teach that the human soul is created at conception? Second, how does the soul contract original sin from Adam? A great deal can go wrong in considering both of these questions.

The Church has always held that the human person is a union of a body and a rational soul, and that each soul is created individually by God. But over the centuries there have been theological debates over exactly when the soul is created and infused into the human body. Revelation does not answer this question, but the Church has always answered philosophically in this way: The soul is created in the same instant in which it is infused into the body, and that happens as soon as the matter is suitable. In other words, biology plays a key role in answering this question.

This is why, in the medieval period, most theologians held that the soul is created and infused at the time of “quickenning”, which is essentially when we become aware of the movement of the baby in the womb. However, we now know that the “matter”—the body—is distinctively human from the moment of conception, when the sperm and egg unite to form the zygote. There is no time after successful fertilization that the embryo is or can be anything other than human. Consequently, Catholics can now confidently state that the soul is created by God and joined to the body at the precise moment of conception. In addition, of course the soul remains united to the body until the matter becomes unsuitable, that is, until death—after which the soul continues in a disembodied state.

## Original Sin

Original Sin is a tougher nut to crack. I explained that our first parents were created in a state of what is called Original Justice, which is essentially a share in God’s life which ensures that our passions always operate in full accord with reason (so no concupiscence) and our bodies need not undergo the corruption of death (which, left purely to nature, must occur). But our first parents disrupted the relationship between grace and nature through pride. They trusted their own judgment more than they trusted God’s judgment, and so lost Original Justice. That is, they lost the special graces that elevated their human

nature to a higher preternatural state.

From this point on, we like to say that our first parents could not pass on to their children what they themselves no longer possessed, and so all of their descendants are born into a state of separation from God which we call Original Sin. Looking ahead, of course, it is the mission of Jesus Christ to remedy that problem and draw us back into union with God by means of the sanctifying graces He won for us through his universal atonement for sin.

To my surprise, my correspondent responded to my answers by saying the following: “I believe the soul is there at conception but don’t believe God creates a sinful soul or a soul in the state of death.” This told me immediately that my explanation did not address some of his key concerns. Given his particular assumptions about sin and death, a fuller discussion is vital to a proper understanding.

### **The State of Nature**

Many theologians in the 19th and early 20th centuries over-emphasized the state of nature, but considering what is purely natural to man does help with some questions. For example, to understand Original Sin we must recognize it is not a state of personal sin but simply our natural state, the state of the human person when left solely to his own natural abilities. With respect to animal souls, for example, we do not suggest that God creates souls in sin or creates dead souls simply because animals are not united to God and so they die. Rather, we understand that the animal soul is a principle of life which corresponds perfectly with the animal’s nature. When the animal’s bodily matter ceases to be what it is designed to be, the animal soul goes out of existence. Animal souls are not rational souls. The animal nature does not admit of a spiritual dimension that transcends mortality.

Up to a point we can apply the same logic to our own case. Left to the capacities of nature itself, both our separation from God and our mortality are perfectly intelligible without assuming that God has created our souls sinful or dead. Rather, God has created us without that share of supernatural life which enables us to transcend what is purely natural, escape bodily death, and aspire to union with Him. Original Sin is not any kind of personal sin, and it ought to go without saying that our souls are not created “dead” (for if so, we would never exist as human persons at all). But since Adam and Eve sinned, God has not chosen to endow us at the moment of conception with all the graces—that is, the share in His life—which He has designed us to receive in reaching our highest perfection.

We can acknowledge that the usual explanation—that Adam and Eve “could not pass

on what they did not have”—is shorthand for a deeper mystery. It may well have been part of God’s design that, had they not sinned, our first parents would have had the ability to pass on their state of Original Justice through procreation. We do not know. But what we do know is that after they sinned they were not able to do so. Here, however, we must introduce a caution against carrying the “state of nature” argument too far, as applied to human persons. For the main truth to be grasped is that God created man, even in the natural order, with a capacity to participate in the life of grace.

### **Stepping back and looking up**

We are, of course, dealing with Divine mysteries here. We cannot fully grasp them. But we can say that, by giving the human person intellect and will, God has made him in His image and likeness. Through his unique rational soul, then, the human person has an affinity for God (which animals lack), can love God (which animals cannot do), and can be elevated to a supernatural perfection which transcends their natural perfections (a capacity that animals lack). We also know that God has created us with this capacity to love Him because He loves us. In fact, since He also knows that He Himself is the highest good, He wants us to possess the everlasting joy of union with Himself.

This means that the question of Original Sin is part of a much larger question about how God plans to bring us to this ineffable joy. When speaking in shortcuts (and the whole story of the creation and fall is full of them) it is possible to be thrown off by some detail in the shortcut that strikes us as significant, but in a way that is incorrect. A typical example would be to devalue the lessons of Genesis because the author seemed to believe that the knowledge of good and evil grows on trees. Another would be to equate personal sin and/or dead souls with Original Sin because, as a shortcut, we describe it as a kind of separation from God. However, it is a degree of separation only in comparison with what Adam and Eve initially enjoyed. For we are never in this world completely separated from God, or completely without grace of any kind. If we were, we would cease to exist.

An important key to understanding these things properly is to avoid seeing God’s effort to bring us into union with Himself as a series of mistakes which cause him to change tacks. The Fall does not necessitate a change of plan; it is a part of the plan. Everything is present to God; He need not try different options only to reject the ones that do not work. No: From all eternity He knew that the very best way to unite us with Him through His surpassing love was to create our first parents in what we call the state of Original Justice, even though He knew that through pride they would lose this state for themselves and their descendants. This is a mystery, of course, but it is perfectly safe

to say that God has known from all eternity that our experience of sin and our awareness that something is wrong would be the surest way to draw the greatest possible number of us into union with Himself, without violating the freedom of our wills—a freedom which is, after all, essential to our capacity for love.

So what was the purpose of the state of Original Justice? Again, we can penetrate mysteries only so far, but we can also see how beneficial it is for us to have an awareness, through Judeo-Christian culture, of how God embraced the human person from the beginning, giving us all a foretaste of our true destiny. Surely this gives greater substance to our understanding of what is in store for us in “the new heavens and the new earth”—as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah (65:17, 66:22), endorsed by Peter (2 Pet 3), and shown in a vision in the Book of Revelation (21:1).

Whether we understand all this well or badly, it is in fact *The Plan*. It has always been The Plan. There have been no changes, no resets, no starting over from scratch with some other plan. This should enable us to see that the Church certainly does not teach that God has given us sinful souls, or dead souls. What He has given us is a nature open to Himself, knowing that God is God and we are not, and restless until we can rest in Him. What He has given us is the best possible nature, and the best grace-filled options, for *freely* cooperating with His plan for our eternal happiness.

## What We Believe

The other aspect of my correspondent’s response that startled me was his declaration that “I believe” this but “I don’t believe” that. I do not know exactly how he meant this to be taken. I presume it is simply an honest declaration that God has not revealed that He has given us sinful souls or dead souls, so why should anyone believe it? But many today could say similar things from a far different motive. Such a statement could easily indicate that the writer chooses to sit in judgment of Revelation itself, as if it is up to each of us to cobble together a series of religious beliefs which suit our own insights and preferences. Isn’t this the dominant form of “religiosity” in our time?

Yes, and nothing could be more foolish. We can know very little about either God or His plan of salvation through our own natural abilities. All we can know is whatever is obvious in the natural law. Thus, as St. Paul said, we can (and ought to) know that God exists because of the created things that could only have come from Him; and, as Newman has noted with particular cogency, our experience of conscience teaches us that we live under a judgment, and therefore there must be a Judge. In other words, God *must care about how we behave*.

If we can know by nature that God exists and that He cares about how we behave,

we can reason to a third and crucial point: God wishes to communicate His will to us, and so we must expect a Divine Revelation. But here our mastery of supernatural reality ends. If we do not find a credible Revelation, we must patiently pray for one. And if we do find a credible Revelation, we must use that Revelation—and that alone—as the only possible source of information about what God’s plan is, and how it unfolds in time.

In other words, none of us may say from his own lights that “I believe” such-and-such about God and His plan for us, but “I don’t believe” something else about God and His plan. We have no possible basis for passing a judgment based either on our own imagination or on the widespread fashions or prejudices of the culture which has formed us. On our own, we have almost no idea what God “must be like”. Instead, all of us are bound to say “I believe” *this* because God has revealed it to be true, and I reject *that* because it contradicts what God has revealed. Beyond this, we can increase our understanding of God by studying His revelation, reflecting on and reasoning about the various revealed facts and principles, and discerning the connections among them in order to better grasp the whole.

We must recognize that there is no other option by which any of us can know the slightest particular of God’s salvific plan. We cannot sit in judgment of these particulars. Either He has revealed them or He has not. Our job is to seek to understand and live what He has revealed. If the story of our first parents teaches us anything, it ought to teach us that the worst possible mistake we can make is to approach God’s plan with pride, sitting in judgment on what we will or will not accept as true and good. We can believe only by the authority of God revealing. To second-guess God is to participate, once again, in the Original Sin.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=720>

# Pope Francis and *Humanae Vitae*: The difference to me

Let us return for a moment to Phil Lawler’s commentary on June 23rd, [A papal commission reconsidering \*Humanae Vitae\*? No, but...](#) I was visiting family in California when Phil posted this, but I did want to say something further about what is a very important topic.

The points made in the commentary are spot on. Phil concludes that no commission has been established to “reconsider” *Humanae Vitae* (at least not in the sense of changing what Pope Paul VI taught in 1968) but expresses concern about the guidance Pope Francis has given to both the John Paul II Institute and the Pontifical Academy for Life. This guidance could well result in more of the kinds of articles, interviews and pastoral decisions that we have seen recently both in Rome and in various dioceses, sometimes questioning settled matters like the Church’s inability to ordain women.

As examples of what I mean, see three of my own recent commentaries: [Don’t worry: The Black Pope is just a symbol of the \*zeitgeist\*](#) and [Reopening the question of women priests: A theological travesty and a spiritual tragedy](#) and [Why is there a resurgence of infidelity among Catholic leaders?](#)

What I wanted to add to this discussion is a reference to the one guarantee we have. The guarantee that the Magisterium of the Church will never teach an error in faith and morals, and so cannot possibly contradict itself, may seem very minimal, given the wide range of methods Catholic leaders can use to warp and undermine the truth (if they are so inclined). But this guarantee is all anyone who cares needs to understand faith and morals properly, so that he or she cannot be led away from God by wolves masquerading as shepherds. Indeed, the very fact that we must work harder and take our faith far more seriously, when we have only the Magisterium to guide us, may be one reason that the guarantee is so limited.

## A perfect example

You may recall that Pope Paul VI’s teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is a perfect example of this guarantee in action. In the light of the emergence and widespread use of “the Pill” in the 1960s, Pope Paul formed a commission to look into the Church’s past teaching on contraception, such as that expressed in *Casti Connubii* in 1930 by Pope Pius XI. He

wanted to discern whether the new chemical processes, not available in 1930, could be considered moral. This commission ended up divided on the subject, but a strong majority concluded that artificial contraception as understood at that time was morally acceptable. This group issued what is called “the Majority Report”.

Much as with Vatican II, quite a bit of the internal discussions, and of course the Majority Report itself, were leaked to the secular press. Accordingly, news media around the world gleefully reported that the Church was about to proclaim the Pill to be perfectly moral. Unsurprisingly, its use among Catholics continued to rise rapidly. It is true that a minority report was also issued by members of the commission who disagreed with its official (majority) conclusion. But there was no doubt in the media, nor in the minds of most Catholic moral theologians teaching in Catholic colleges and universities at the time, that enlightenment had finally conquered the backward and benighted intransigence of the Roman Church.

It is here that we begin to realize the importance of that subtle Magisterial guarantee. To shed some light, consider the touching and very brief poem by William Wordsworth, “[She dwelt among the untrodden ways](#)”. In this poem William Wordsworth penned a line nearly as brilliant as his reference to Mary as “our tainted nature’s solitary boast” (see another of his short poems, “[The Virgin](#)”). In his “untrodden ways” poem, though, Wordsworth used superb understatement in praising a young woman who led a relatively obscure life. She was “A maid whom there were none to praise / And very few to love”. The last stanza, however, reveals her importance:

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be; But she is in her  
grave, and, oh, The difference to me!

It seems to me this is exactly like the rather obscure and highly-limited gift of the infallibility of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. The Holy Spirit serenely enlightens us through this gift. And the difference between the presence and absence of this gift, invisible to the eyes of the multitude, is absolutely vital to those who love God.

After reading both the majority and the minority reports, Pope Paul VI—contrary to every expectation—declared contraception within marriage to be intrinsically evil. But if that little-understood yet living gift of God to His Church had died, or ever could cease to be, all of us who care could join Wordsworth in saying this about Divine Wisdom: “She is in her grave, and, oh, the difference to me!”

View this item on [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org):

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1489>

# Complaining? It's a question of Providence.

When we are children we tend to complain incessantly. We are bored or hungry or don't like how we're being treated. Often we are so focused on some desire (such as "electronics time", not that this was a problem when I was a kid) that we cannot even consider doing anything else. We hurt and crave comfort. We deliberately annoy our siblings, which in some ways is just another way of complaining.

In exasperation, our parents gradually begin to punish us for complaining, very commonly under the heading of "whining". Finally, with respect to the little boredoms we find so intolerable as kids, we start to hear the refrain that "only boring people are bored." Sad but true. And it is even more true that only spiritually underdeveloped people are bored.

St. Paul famously claimed: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Cor 13:11). Well, maybe he did. But there was certainly a part of his adult life when he complained vehemently about Christians. Presumably St. Paul understood adulthood not in a purely natural way but as a kind of spiritual revolution: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Cor 13:12).

Complaining can take several forms in adults. A telling example is irritability, which is little more than another way to complain. No matter how we put it, the question for us is: Have we undergone that spiritual revolution?

## Back to the Old Testament

Fortunately, we have a highly-developed context in Scripture for considering this problem of childish complaining, which we are nearly all so slow to outgrow. The history of God's relationship with His chosen people in the Old Testament is one long story of murmuring against the LORD. From the Exodus to the time of Christ, the Jews complain again and again about the plans God has made for them in taking them to be His own. In fact, early in their history the Jewish people had already raised the basic task of complaining to something of an art form through their perfection of the rhetorical question.

Among more mature souls, the dangers of the rhetorical question could be overcome by pushing it a healthy step further, over a kind of emotional precipice, making it a staple of classic Jewish humor. But that takes spiritual maturity, which was so often lacking: “Why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink” (Num 20:5), Or, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food” (Num 21:5).

There are dozens of such expressions, but here is my favorite: “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” (Ex 14:11) The Chosen People were coming close to the classic humor there, but without having tumbled over that critical edge I spoke of, which is really the precipice of trust. It is from that precipice that we fall into the Father’s arms, bubbling over with laughter. In the reality, though, Moses did not find their complaining funny. He himself claimed that this people was too much to bear, and God was none too pleased.

It is just here that we begin to discern a great lesson. Moses and Aaron put it to the people this way:

For what are we, that you murmur against us? ...When the LORD gives you in the evening flesh to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your murmurings which you murmur against him—what are we? Your murmurings are not against us but against the LORD. [Ex 16:7-8]

### **Against the LORD**

Make no mistake, our own murmurings are against God too. What it means to complain, at its deepest root, is to murmur against the God Who has chosen us as His own, as if the dispositions He has made for us are somehow not only inadequate but grossly inadequate. So often we forget that God’s beneficent Providence encompasses all, and that whatever occurs, no matter how difficult for us to take in stride, is for our good. Indeed, it is ordained to draw us into closer union with God, to place all our trust in Him: To fall over that precipice into Daddy’s arms, and—in the spirit at least—to laugh.

The New Testament goes even further than the Old. It contains a treatise against complaining. We find it in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, which I will quote at some length:

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes

for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness.... We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.... What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? ...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Rom 8:24-39]

Just in case we do not trust Providence sufficiently (and, to ask the obvious rhetorical question, who does?), Our Lord and Savior also tried to make the matter clear: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Lk 12:6-7). This is so true that we are to do the exact opposite of complaining, even in prayer: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:9-10). Only then may we turn to our own needs.

What we realize only very seldom is that our petty complaints from day to day are all murmurings against Divine Providence, that is, against God. Somehow, He has not arranged things to our liking. Were there no hard beds at home that we had to come to this hotel for a sleepless night? Was there no bad job in my own neighborhood, that I had to go all the way downtown to be fired? Was there no doctor with children, that my own child had to get sick? Were there no really annoying people in the store, that the sales person had to be rude to *me*? Were there no over-proud Dallas Cowboy fans at the football game, that the Washington Redskins had to lose?

Subtract the humor in the last example, and it goes on and on and on. It is all murmuring against God, and against a Love we cannot always appreciate. This recognition is not an instant cure. In my own case, more is needed, and I am sure that we all have new habits to form. But this recognition makes an extraordinarily good start. It gives us what we need to take the next step, the step over the edge. It enables us to pass from discomfort to humor and so on to trust. And though this trust is not the same as a

purely natural happiness, it is still a breathless freefall of uncomplaining spiritual joy. Our Father's arms are open wide, and Daddy does not miss.

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## Making up for—and regretting—lost time

I spend at least some portion of most of my days doing what we call “making up for lost time.” All the things that have not quite gotten done as quickly as they should have—or worse, as quickly as I *expected* them to be done—claim extra hours from another day along with concentrated high-speed work, sometimes ignoring the futility of speeding ahead with a tired body or mind. But I think most readers will recognize that this isn’t just about me.

There is a challenge in this rat race which requires prudent decisions. But just when we seem to get a handle on our priorities, something goes wrong, offering the same challenge all over again. Worse still, one of the things that goes wrong for almost everybody (provided we have escaped the alternative) is *old age*. I would place the average peak of efficiency at about age 35. It varies, but there is a combination of health, strength, energy, knowledge, experience, and ease of learning new things which—precisely as a *combination*—peaks shortly before what we call “middle age”.

Without a degree of spiritual and moral maturity, our overall peak performance will never reach its highest possible standard. But after operating at this peak, and savoring our own abilities for some years, we begin to be aware of our own decline. This happens to nearly everyone at least by the age of 50. It is during this decline that we become far more aware of our finitude, and we often begin to reflect on the things to which we wish we had paid more attention, instead of constantly “making up for lost time.” By our sixties, we may even resolve to make a virtue of necessity, and try to slow down.

When a sincere Christian (one who harbors no illusions that he is somehow owed a long period of “retirement”) deliberately strives to slow down, it is more often a good choice than not. It may seem odd that I should describe “slowing down” as something we must “strive for”, but I suspect there has been no active adult who at some point has not had to personally invest in that striving. What we are striving for, really, is a kind of balance or harmony that permits us to serve God and others without that disruptive and costly freneticism which is so characteristic of our early twenty-first century lives.

This slowing-down enables us to begin to learn the value of “being”, rather than simply “doing”. The emphasis on “being” harkens back to the injunction to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). It creates in us a kind of “presence”—to God, to family,

and to others. In the past, almost surely, some lack in this presence has diminished the value of all of our “doing”, despite our best efforts. I still do not believe that this is just about me!

### Time’s betrayal

Now, just as we begin to get a handle on all this, we find ourselves betrayed by time itself. Two things happen. First, no matter how much we “slow down”, time goes by faster and faster. I discussed this aspect of aging in an essay I remembered as being written a few months ago, but it turned out to be dated in 2009, [Speeding through Time](#). God forbid that I should slow down to dwell on it again here. Suffice it to say that, at age 69, I am far more aware of time’s furious pace than I was at the tender age of 61. Moreover, a few weeks ago, an 83-year-old friend remarked: “Ah, to be your age again! Time goes faster and faster every year.”

Yes, Virginia, there is no Santa Claus. And neither will you enjoy a deliciously slow, relaxed and prolonged retirement, no matter how in the world you try for it. When we are children we are antsy for age. We cannot wait for our birthday; we wish we were 10 or 12, or even (God help us) 16 or 18. But time betrays us all in the end, at least from a purely natural perspective. The more we desire time, the less we have it. The more we want to slow it down, the faster it goes. It is almost as if we were designed expressly to have exactly this experience of time.

And, of course, we were. The positive aspect of this distressing experience is the excellent chance it has of awakening us to what awaits us when our time is up. This is no less salutary for a Christian than for a pagan. The latter should be moved to seek God; the former should be moved to see in God the true and perfect fulfillment of his whole life. This is especially true when we consider the things we begin to regret as we age:

- We will never see our five-year-old child’s smile again or enjoy our baby’s hug. Even all of our living children are in some ways lost to us *as children* by this horrendous betrayal of time. Yet it would be a *grotesquerie* to stop-and-lock anyone we love in a particular moment of time, creating a kind of museum in suspended animation to satisfy our emotional yearnings.
- We will regret many things that we did wrong, or people we treated badly, with no way now to go back and make amends.
- We will find ourselves saddened by the realization that we never took a particular opportunity, tried to develop a particular talent, studied a particular

subject, or made a point of experiencing something that we were interested in doing—but never did.

- If we have any sense, we will also become increasingly aware of how little we have accomplished (despite having striven to accomplish so much) even if others regard us as very successful. For what any one of us can do (even if the Lord does build the house) is as a drop in the ocean compared with all that needs doing.

## Time's victory

But time never really betrays us. It tells us, with increasing intensity as we age, what we are for, whom our limited time must serve, and why even the seeming treachery of time is a gift. For time must by its very nature give way to eternity, in one of two radically different ways. Moreover, with respect to our deepest yearnings, we are better provided for than we know, by this racing passage of time. This great truth is difficult to express in its full intensity, but a few great poets have come very close—writing truly yet without losing their particularity as persons living in a human culture, a human time, a human place.

First let us take the famous poem written in Spanish by St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), which has been preserved in her own handwriting:

Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing frighten you, All things pass away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. He who has God Finds he lacks nothing; God alone suffices.

“He who has God finds he lacks nothing.” This is the whole point, yet perhaps a modern poet has expressed it in a way which responds more clearly to the authentic human yearnings we must invariably share, in a form we can more easily cherish. There is no more fitting conclusion to this reflection on time than the last two stanzas of “[The Hound of Heaven](#)” by Francis Thompson (1859 - 1907). He was, as you will see, of a time much like our time, and of a temper much like our own. He was as prone as we are, through our very reminiscences, to slip away yet again from God:

‘Strange, piteous, futile thing! Wherefore should any set thee love apart? Seeing none but I makes much of naught’ (He said), ‘And human love needs human meriting: How hast thou merited— Of all man’s clotted clay the dingiest clot? Alack, thou knowest not How little worthy of any love thou art! Whom wilt

thou find to love ignoble thee,      Save Me, save only Me? All which I took from  
thee I did but take,      Not for thy harms, But just that thou might'st seek it in My  
arms.      All which thy child's mistake Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at  
home:      Rise, clasp My hand, and come!'

Halts by me that footfall: Is my gloom, after all, Shade of His hand, outstretched  
caressingly? 'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest! Thou  
dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.'

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## Practicing apologetics upon ourselves: Five models

When I first wrote on this topic in the last months of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, I did not realize how much more important it would become under Pope Francis. But the following assertion has become increasingly obvious over the past five years, namely, that apologetics is often more valuable to believers than to non-believers.

Most believers—especially young believers in the process of internalizing their faith—go through periods of questioning, and unanswered questions can lead to doubt. At the same time, of course, opportunities do arise to discuss the grounds of our faith with sympathetic non-believers, or even with non-believers who deliberately challenge us. Then again, our secular culture continues to challenge our faith in new ways. Finally, whenever Catholic ecclesiastical leadership transmits confusing signals, a growing number of the faithful wonder whether the teachings of the Church have changed—a possibility that dramatically undermines the credibility of Christianity. With all of these situations in mind, St. Peter advises: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15).

As a general rule, we will seize such opportunities by responding to the specific problem, question or issue that is raised. But in thinking about the whole chain of argument leading from unbelief to belief, or from nagging doubt to secure conviction, we may not have a clear sense of where or how to begin. Perhaps the most important thing to remember, apart from the need to be able to give clear answers to sincere questions, is that what really draws people toward faith in Christ and membership in the Church is not so much arguments as the inherent attractiveness of the goods of Christianity, which we call motives of credibility.

One of these goods, of course, is our own serene acceptance Divine Revelation as understood through the teachings of the Church. This is far better, and far more attractive, than any kind of wilting retreat on the one hand, or pugnacious anxiety on the other. Nonetheless, it is ultimately impossible to prove to anyone by argument that the Catholic faith is true, for faith is a gift. Yet it is a gift undoubtedly offered more frequently than it is accepted. It follows that the intellectual work to which we are called in response to all of these concerns is to find ways to remove obstacles to the acceptance

of the gift of faith so that we can prompt a kind of yearning for the faith, along with the expectation that, on closer examination, it will prove beautiful, good and true.

This is the primary purpose of what we call apologetics. Moreover, in our time, every Catholic depends far more than he might like on his own devices. It follows again that we must first practice apologetics upon ourselves.

Fortunately, there are many approaches one can take to achieve the goal. Broadly speaking, we can classify them according to their various modes of reception in the seeker. Therefore, we may speak of *models* of apologetics. I will discuss five of them here.

### **The Common Sense Model**

By the Common Sense model, I mean an approach to the truth of the Faith which rests on what most of us perceive even without thinking very much. This approach was favored by Blessed John Henry Newman, who regarded the argument from conscience as the most persuasive of all, and by G. K. Chesterton, who was struck by how remarkably the Catholic Faith fit with his almost instinctive perception of original sin.

Every person perceives a moral order from an early age. Operating through the faculty of conscience, this perception includes a sense of right and wrong, and an understanding that we are *expected*, by some power beyond ourselves, to do what is right. This interior perception of moral reality leads us to an awareness of a lawgiver who is also our judge. It also suggests that this judge must care about us (else why the law and the judgment?), and so he must desire to reveal himself more fully to us. Thus the argument from conscience leads us to look for a Revelation, and to determine which claimed revelations are actually real.

In a similar way, most of us are struck by the strange fact that the world is dysfunctional, particularly with respect to our most fundamental perceptions of a moral order. No matter where we look, we see that people yearn for justice, peace and harmony but encounter, despite these aspirations, injustice, anxiety and discord. This is so from the macrocosm of international affairs right down to the microcosm of our own hearts. Everywhere the world seems to have been put off its proper course by some aboriginal calamity. In the midst of such reflections, the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin fits our situation like a key fits into a lock.

This use of what is really our common sense for apologetics also lies at the root of St. Paul's comments about our perception of God in the natural order: "[W]hat can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been

clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:19-20). Paul is not talking about what is reasoned out formally here, but about what is directly *perceived*.

Like all apologetics, however, this approach to God works only with those who do not more or less deliberately close their minds. The logical trajectory of our native impressions ought to be plain enough, and yet many constantly attempt to pull in the opposite direction. Saint Paul expresses the problem frankly: “[T]hey are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...” (Rom 1:20-22).

### **The Rational Model**

By proceeding now to the Rational Model, I do not want to imply that common sense is irrational. However, it is not something which operates as a distinctively formal intellectual process. We do not deliberately think our way to common sense; we simply possess it, mostly unconsciously until we are put to the test. But those who formally inquire into the question of God naturally seek to test common sense by pursuing a logical argument which will bring them to a more certain, or at least more strictly verifiable, conclusion. In this realm lies what we call natural theology, or the formal philosophizing about God.

Some thinkers, such as Richard Swinburne, have sought to demonstrate how nearly every point of the Christian faith can be established by reason, including such mysteries as the Trinity. It is both a worthwhile study and a bracing exercise to explore the accessibility of the Faith to human reason, but it would be a grave mistake to think the details of Christian doctrine need not have been revealed. It is really more a matter of recognizing how inherently logical or fitting the various points of Revelation appear once we know what they are. As we may well imagine, this was the stock in trade of many defenders of the faith in the so-called Age of Reason.

But certain basic facts of religion can be known with absolute certainty through natural reason, as St. Paul’s remarks in the preceding section suggest. Chief among these are the existence of God along with the moral obligation to worship him (the virtue of religion), and the existence and immortality of the human soul. The arguments for the existence of God proceed along the five ways of St. Thomas Aquinas, though he was by no means the first to use such proofs. Of these, the argument from contingency is perhaps the most powerful. Everything in our natural experience is contingent on something else. Therefore, nothing whatsoever could exist unless there is some non-contingent being on whom everything else depends. This necessary self-existing

being is God.

Related arguments can be adduced to prove that there can be only one such being, and also that the universe is not itself eternal. Though much was made in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of philosophers who claim to have refuted such arguments, they have actually done more to confuse than refute, leaving too many to believe they can ignore the arguments without a hearing. Fortunately, chief among those who have demonstrated that the case for natural theology is stronger than ever is Robert Spitzer, SJ in his outstanding book *New Proofs for the Existence of God* (see my review, [Proving God](#)).

The arguments for the existence and immortality of the soul, which have been known and used since ancient times, depend on the basic understanding that the human person has non-material capacities which cannot be caused by matter, however highly developed and organized: self-consciousness, for example, which is the first indicator of intellect. We should also include free will here, though it is much-denied, since even all those who wish to deny it always act as if they really believe they have the power to choose. In any case, it is a small further step to realize that these extra-material capacities are, by definition, properly spiritual, and that the spirit, not being composed of parts, cannot decompose and go out of existence. In other words, the human spirit or soul is by nature immortal.

The Rational Model of apologetics, like the Common Sense Model, actually brings us only to the doorstep of Revelation. If it is true that there is a God and that our souls are immortal, then we have some work to do in learning all we can about both. At the same time, reason and common sense are great helps in assessing various claims of revelation, and in understanding and assenting to Revelation once it is found.

### **The Revelatory Model**

One might think that what I call the Revelatory Model would be placed either first or last in any list, but in the breakdown I am using here, the Common Sense and Rational models do not require exposure to Revelation until after they have done their work, and the two models I will present after the Revelatory Model require exposure to the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, the Revelatory Model is the key to evangelization; it sits right at the heart of the Gospel. This model insists that the One we have yearned for is Jesus Christ, and that He has established a Church to carry on His mission and authority until the end of time.

It is important to remember that the Revelatory Model is almost exclusively concerned with the question of authority. The argument from authority is ordinarily not

the strongest sort of argument, but it is the strongest argument by far when the authority is God, who (in the famous traditional phrase) can neither deceive nor be deceived. It is this concern for authority which governs the whole course of the Revelatory argument.

The argument begins with what we call the “signs of Revelation”. These are signs, wonders, or miracles which can be explained only by Divine action and which accompany some disclosure of God’s nature and will. Many people have claimed private communications with God, and some of these have even managed to convince large numbers of people that their communications were real. Islam is founded on such private claims, for example, as is Mormonism. Apart from Christians, however, only Jews have based their confidence in their knowledge of God on signs of Revelation which were manifested publicly and verifiably to a substantial community.

Christianity, and in particular Catholicism, conceptually depends on this principle. Jesus Christ came teaching about God, about how we must live, and about eternal life, and the truth of what He said was attested by public, verifiable signs and wonders of every kind, signs and wonders which could only be performed by Divine power: feeding the multitudes, healing the sick and infirm, controlling the weather, raising the dead, and the ultimate miracle, His own resurrection—which He foretold to the very day. If we do not regard Christ’s utterances on the question of His own Divinity to be perfectly clear, these miracles do not quite prove His Divinity. The Church later used Christ’s own authority to clear up any remaining doubts. But they do prove that His mission and teaching were approved by God, such that all authority in heaven and earth had somehow been given to Him (Mt 28:18).

All of this was clear to the community to which He preached, and it was also clear that Jesus Christ formally established a Church (Mt 16:18) to carry on His mission, that He commissioned His apostles to be the pillars of that Church (Mt 18:18), and that He commissioned Peter in particular to wield the keys to His kingdom (Mt 16:19) and to confirm His brothers in the Faith (Lk 22:32). Moreover, Christ established that this authority should be passed on to the successors of Peter and the apostles, promising to be with the Church until the end of time (Mt 28:20).

The historical record is very clear on this key point of the ongoing authority of the Church—the acceptance that, when the Church speaks, it is a case of “he who hears you hears me” (Lk 10:16). The faithful relied from the first on ecclesiastical authority over Revelation, exercised by all the bishops in union with the bishop of Rome—an authority which went without significant challenge for several centuries, and which has now endured in the Catholic Church for some two millennia. Further details of this Revelatory Model of apologetics are included in many other articles I have written on

CatholicCulture.org, the most important of which are collected into the second volume of my [Essays in Apologetics](#).

### **The Transcendent Model**

In the introduction, I mentioned the signal importance of motives of credibility. Once people are aware of Catholicism, they may be attracted by many aspects of the Church: the sublimity and consistency of her doctrine, the universality and longevity of her endurance, the remarkable holiness of her saints, the incarnational capacity of her system to respond to the whole man and perfect every culture, the unequalled achievements of her philosophers and theologians, the tremendous beauty of the works of art created under her inspiration, the extensiveness of her charitable works.

An approach based on these things is appropriately called the Transcendent Model because such Catholic achievements strike observers as human but beyond the human mode. It is clear that all of these things are being achieved by ordinary men and women, and yet somehow the results transcend what we would ordinarily expect of mere flesh and blood. Many are first attracted to Christ and the Church because they sense in them something beyond the ordinary, an almost inexplicable ability to produce what can really be explained only by the grace of God.

For this reason, it is very wise to draw the attention of others to these triumphs in accordance with their interests, such as introducing a philosopher to Aquinas, a musician to Palestrina, or an historian to the Church's marvelous consistency over time. Those who love art should be introduced to what we might call Catholic art—the Gothic style, for example, or the work of a Giotto, a Fra Angelico, a Michelangelo. Those who love literature should encounter Dante or perhaps English poets such as Francis Thompson and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Nearly everyone can be effectively introduced to some saint, a saint who embodies many of the person's ideals and raises them to a new level. Environmentalists should learn from Francis of Assisi, psychologists from Augustine, and all who yearn for contemplation from Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross. The list goes on. There are saints for everyone.

Nor should we ignore the Church's immense charitable works, so evident in every age. From well before the third century, when St. Lawrence responded to the demand of Roman officials to see the wealth of the Church by pointing to the poor, a uniquely Catholic charitable power has extended even to the present day, beyond Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who served the destitute and dying just a few years ago. It can be very effective to acquaint others with this record. At the same time, nothing is more effective than to demonstrate in our own lives this uncanny ability to be fully human but beyond

the human mode. Genuine holiness attracts. At the very least, as St. Peter went on to say after he told us to always be ready to explain our faith: “[K]eep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet 3:16).

### **The Psychological Model**

The Transcendent Model sometimes blurs into what I call the Psychological Model, by which a very interested person begins to live the Christian life before he is fully convinced of its Divine origins. This has been proposed in various times and places as a more complete preparation for grace, a disposition not just of the mind but of the whole person to receive God’s gifts. Clearly it requires a significant interest in finding for oneself what one perceives Christians already possess. Because it is attachment to vice which leads the will to instruct the intellect to ignore the truth of Christian arguments, someone who is truly seeking the Faith may be brought, at least in some measure, to lay aside bad habits for a time and practice living as a Christian ought to live—and then see what happens.

Usually this is not so much a formal or structured commitment as the natural result of a person’s attraction to some Catholic or group of Catholics whom he or she has grown to admire. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and if we truly begin to live transcendent lives (as discussed in the previous model), we may well find those who are close to us attempting to imitate our Christian habits and virtues. We may be confident that any sincere effort along these lines will be rewarded. The effort already arises from a gift of grace as yet unrecognized, just as the same effort disposes the seeker to receive more grace. At length the grace of Faith itself will ordinarily be given, and the whole process of conversion will become explicitly Catholic.

Even from the purely natural point of view, living a well-ordered life—a life characterized by an essential integrity of body and soul—most often brings a certain peace or sense of fulfillment. Nobody is capable of achieving this apart from grace, but it would be incorrect to suppose that the human person is ever completely cut off from every form of grace. In any case, living integrally even in the more natural sense bears its own fruit, and the specific role of grace will become clearer as time goes on. For this reason, the Psychological Model has real value for those who can be brought to try it—the approach of living as if one were certain that Christ is Lord, so as to better dispose oneself to receive all of His gifts, which we sincerely pray are real.

Even for those who have already received the gift of Faith, this model can be practiced with great effectiveness. We may be aware of our attachment to certain vices;

we may not at all be convinced that our happiness will increase if we give them up. Why not make a commitment to refrain from them for a set period of time? And see what happens!

A good Catholic, of course, is continually at work even within himself in all five modes, not always as a work of apologetics, but as part of the work of deepening Christian faith, hope and love. Reflecting on how our common sense actually leads us to God, brushing up on our philosophical understanding, studying the details and proofs surrounding authentic Revelation, living lives of transcendent love, and pushing ourselves closer to God even when we are not quite sure we wish to do so—all of these are the makings of a fully integrated life. I mean a life rooted completely in Jesus Christ. I mean such a life as can maximally perfected only within the Catholic Church.

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# The Genesis Wars: Forgetfulness of Christ?

I've had several interesting discussions lately probing the account of Creation in Genesis, on the one hand, and the scientific theory of evolution, on the other. Discussions of human origins are endlessly fascinating! Too often, however, they carry a high emotional cost. They may even trouble our Faith.

These negatives arise, frankly, from thinking about the whole matter in the wrong way.

A thorough analysis of the various theories of human origins, and of how to think about the related issues properly, would extend far beyond the scope of a single essay. For a look at the various scientific theories, consider reading Thomas Fowler and Daniel Kuebler's *The Evolution Controversy*, which I reviewed ten years ago in [Evolution: The Missing Link](#). To probe more deeply into the philosophical problems which plague our discussions of both theology and science, consider Gerard Verschuuren's *Aquinas and Modern Science: A New Synthesis of Faith & Reason*, which I briefly reviewed last week along with three other relevant books in [Four ways to grasp natural meaning from the God Who Is](#).

But there are three different kinds of errors—one philosophical, one theological and one spiritual—which account for all of the anxiety we may feel when we get into these discussions, and for our tendency to cling to details that do not really matter as if they are keys to our supernatural destiny. It is these three errors which I will discuss here.

## The Philosophical Error

It is extraordinarily unfortunate that so many scientists, along with the larger secular community, tend to see scientific knowledge as a substitute for explanations formerly provided by religion, and by Christianity in particular. Whatever the merits of the theory of evolution, for example, as a simple matter of recent history it has been used intellectually, socially and culturally as a kind of club with which to beat religion over the head. As a result, Christians often feel that if they are to remain secure in their Faith, they must cling to older, more congenial theories or at least discredit today's regnant theories. Nor is evolution the only issue which has produced this difficulty. It also happened with the theory of heliocentricity. This problem typically afflicts Catholics far

less than Protestants, who, believing in *sola scriptura*, have lost the Church's understanding of how to read Scripture.

In any case, the whole quarrel is rooted in a gigantic category mistake when it comes to what we mean by "creation". When scientists consider creation, they are actually talking about the sequential steps by which everything in the universe was *fabricated*. But that is not creation in either the philosophical or the religious sense; it is simply "construction" or, expressed more personally, "craftsmanship". A scientist explores how natural processes work to produce the various kinds of natural results which we see today. But the concept of Creation does not address the question of how material things interact and how material reality is constructed in time.

Creation addresses the question of why anything should exist at all. In other words, it does not answer a scientific question but a philosophical one. How do matter and energy come to be? How is material reality sustained in being? Note that this is not primarily a temporal question, a question of "when". It is a question of causality, and we should not think of creation as part of a temporal sequence. After all, the very concept of time is a relationship involving matter in motion through space. The power *to create* is the power to create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, "before" time, that is, utterly outside of what we know as time itself. Moreover, as a matter of simple causality, what we call "creation" must *always* be sustained by an uncaused cause that we call God. Creation exists *now* because of God's power. Were there no God, there could never be anything—ever—even *if the universe were eternal*.

A self-subsistent being, whose essence is to exist, brings things to be in a way that lies far beyond the purposes of the physical sciences to explore, for these presuppose a material universe within a temporal framework. The first error on both sides of these discussions is to make an absurd category mistake. The error on the Christian side is to let a category mistake cause us spiritual anxiety.

### **The Theological Error**

The primary theological error which causes so much additional anxiety has been bequeathed to us primarily from the Scriptural literalism of Protestantism. Catholics sometimes fall into this trap as well but, as a matter of historical fact, the vast majority of Christian angst over the theory of evolution is produced by the simple Protestant error that Sacred Scripture is our only source of Revelation and a rule unto itself. Thus each person *must* be able to understand it easily (never mind how many sects understand it differently). It follows, first, that Scripture must be as plain and obvious as a twenty-first century newspaper story and, second, that each reader ought to be able to assert

authoritatively what it means. If we cannot trust the “plain meaning” of the very first book of the Bible, what *can* we trust?

But Catholics know, or ought to know, that Scripture is written in a variety of genres, not all of which are even remotely historical in nature, and that the sure meaning of Scripture (apart from the many spiritual benefits we receive under the influence of the Holy Spirit while reading it and applying it to ourselves) can be asserted definitively only by the authority of Jesus Christ the Son of God as exercised through the Church He founded. Now, with regard to Genesis, the Church in the person of Pope Pius XII has stated that the theory of evolution may be explored as long as we are guided by two “facts” which we know from Revelation and which the Genesis text really does imply: First, that every human person is a descendant of a single set of first parents; second, that God infuses a spiritual soul into each and every human being (which, in fact, is what makes us *persons*, which other material beings are not).

The same necessity of authoritative determination, by the way, applies to our other source of Revelation, Sacred Tradition. For Sacred Tradition (big T) does not consist in what Christians have commonly said or written over time, much of which could be merely prevailing cultural notions. All of that is human tradition (little t). Sacred Tradition is those things revealed by Christ which have been carried on from the apostles through the Christian community. Once again, only the authority of the Church can safely distinguish Tradition from tradition—Sacred Tradition from mere human traditions (such as those Our Lord mentioned when he said “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men” (Mk 7:8)).

In this context, Genesis is as compatible with evolutionary theory as it is with the individual direct “fabrication” of each species and of Adam and Eve. For example, the following verse fits either theory like a glove: “The LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man [that is, the human person] became a living being” (Gn 2:7). Even the order of creation (in one of two different accounts of it in Genesis) is remarkably similar to the order posited in the theory of evolution. Either way, God created the material universe from nothing, giving it a distinctive nature with its own proper potentiality such that it would develop in accordance with His design, and He sustains it in being at every moment. Again, created things must be continuously “caused”, as they cannot be self-subsistent without being God. Without God’s conservational power, then, creation must cease to exist.

Nor should our sense of “what is fitting” enter into this question. When we know certain truths, we can often see ways in which they are “fitting” (such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Our Lady, so fitting for the Mother of God). But to

argue for the truth of anything due to “fittingness” is the weakest of all arguments, as it depends on our own understanding (often culturally-conditioned) of how ideas “ought to” fit together before they are actually known to be true. No, our argument with scientific theories is not based on either theology or fittingness, for scientific theories must be debated on their scientific methodological merits. Rather, our argument is always with scientists who make category mistakes (and with a larger culture which does the same). Our objection is against pushing scientific claims into realms in which the very nature of their disciplines prevents them from having anything to say at all.

### **The Spiritual Error**

We come now to the final problem I wish to treat in our tendency to be spiritually discomfited when the ideas we have derived about human origins from our own reading of Scripture are called into question by scientific theories. The reason for this anxiety is that we so often lose sight of how we know and have Faith in God at all. We forget that we are not talking just about “religion” here, as if all religion is alike, or as if all religion can have value only insofar as philosophy can confirm it or it is widely accepted and practiced.

We forget, in other words, that we believe because of the witness of Jesus Christ. For a wide range of reasons, some of which differ based on our own inner life and experiences, we accept as a matter of historical fact that Jesus Christ did the following:

1. Lived at a particular time and place in history;
2. Claimed to be from God and taught a remarkably sublime doctrine;
3. Performed a great many astounding public miracles to prove his authority;
4. Founded a Church with Peter and his successors at its head, holding “keys to the kingdom of heaven”;
5. Predicted his own death and resurrection;
6. Was crucified, certainly died, and was buried—but rose from the dead as He said, appearing to a great many people both individually and in groups.

When all is said and done, we are not really concerned about what we might call the visible action of God in history at Creation (a concern in any case fraught with philosophical and historical confusion). Rather, we are concerned with the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God into human history through Jesus Christ. Our Faith can be secured

only by Christ. Given this authentic foundation, we have nothing to fear, no matter how much or little we think we understand about loosely-related issues raised by other fields of study. I do not mean our Faith is in any way an irrational commitment, as I would hope this discussion makes perfectly clear. But our Faith does not depend on our understanding of the book of Genesis, how it is to be interpreted, what it reveals about human origins, what others have to say on this complex question, or on the prevailing attitude in our culture toward various scientific theories.

Nor does our Faith depend on whether we think it more fitting that God would have created Adam and Eve individually rather than selecting them as two individuals of a species into which to infuse the souls that made them not only materially human but, at long last, *persons in his own image*. In a similar manner, our Faith did not depend four hundred or so years ago on whether the theory of geocentricity, which seemed to demonstrate the importance of man in Creation, is more fitting than that of heliocentricity, which seemed to demonstrate our material insignificance—*except that God, through no merit of our own, chose to elevate us to the status of sons and daughters*.

No, our Faith depends on Jesus Christ, as mediated to us through His Church. While we are right to find the interpretation of Biblical texts a fascinating and fruitful subject, we are subject to the Church alone in assigning definitive meaning to these texts. For the rest, we should read, meditate, and experience the Holy Spirit's gentle instruction in the love of God. In this personal context, some texts may have great meaning to us at one time or another, move us not at all on other occasions, and hold little personal interest of any kind to many other equally good Christians. Read [St. Augustine's book](#) on how to read Scripture, aptly entitled *On Christian Doctrine*.

Finally, we should grant the force of the comment made by Cardinal Baronius over four hundred years ago when, in commenting on the Galileo case, he stated: "The Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go." One of the first rules of Biblical interpretation is that we must keep the purpose of the sacred text in mind. To that purpose, modern science—*properly understood as science*—has never been, and can never be, a threat.

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# What is the law? When can we ignore it? Part 1: True Law

Civil authorities make many bad laws. This is an inescapable part of the human condition.

The majority of bad laws are simple failures of prudence: These laws do not, for a wide variety of reasons, accomplish the ends for which they are enacted and, in the process of not accomplishing those ends, they do some ancillary harm, such as increasing costs or causing a certain measure of inconvenience. But as our culture shears away from a recognition of the natural law, statutes and regulations more often present us with a genuine moral dilemma.

Since laws which actually require citizens to do evil are becoming more common in our societies, we need to closely examine the nature of law to answer the question of when we may refuse to obey the law. I will divide this discussion into two parts. In this first part, we will consider the nature of human law.

## What is human law?

In his insightful book *Aquinas and Modern Science* (which includes the social sciences), Gerard M. Verschuuren reminds us of St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching on what makes human laws valid. A proper understanding is rooted in the four causes of all human law:

- The *material cause* is the public promulgation of the law;
- The *efficient cause* is the proper authority to promulgate the law;
- The *final cause* is the common good of the people;
- The *formal cause* is a precept of reason in accordance with the natural law.

In introducing these causes, it would have been more precise of me to ask “what constitutes a human law” rather than “what makes human laws valid”. When we think about human law in terms of its proper causes, we see immediately that if one of the causes is lacking, the human prescription we are examining cannot really be a law. Rather, lacking one of its causes, the putative law has failed to come into existence. Instead, we have a kind of legal imposture, which we may refer to as a law at times for

reasons of linguistic convenience.

An example of this more accurate understanding is found in the traditional axiom that any human law which violates the natural law is null and void—which really means, of course, that *it is not a law*. This human prescription in question may have been promulgated as what we call “positive law” and may now be “on the books”. The courts may recognize it as law and adjudicate cases accordingly. The government may punish violations of this alleged law. But it is not a law and, in consequence, it cannot bind.

### **How the causes work**

This will be immediately obvious to us if we reflect a bit on the four necessary causes of law. For example, we will have no trouble grasping the truth that if no law has been promulgated (that is, if a prescription’s material cause as law is lacking), then there is no law to obey. The fact that all of our neighbors assume that there ought to be or even really is a law against X does not mean that a law against X has been promulgated. And if this putative law against X has not, in fact, been promulgated, then there is no law against X to obey.

Similarly, it is not difficult to see that if there is no efficient cause of an alleged law, then there is no law. It is not enough, for example, for the Local Citizen’s Club to proclaim we must all drive at the walking speed of three miles per hour in a school zone. Not one of us would accept a “ticket” from a member of the LCC. If the properly constituted governing authority has not promulgated this as a law, then we may treat it as no more than a pious thought. Indeed, we will crawl through the zone at 3 mph only at the risk of arousing the anger of those behind us, for there is no law to obey, and sensible citizens will think it no part of their moral duty to obey the latest insights of the LCC.

The final cause of the law—the common good—is more difficult to assess, though we all have at least limited experience with how it affects the force of law. Thus, for example, there are many laws on the books in every long-established jurisdiction which are routinely ignored and no longer enforced simply because their relevance to the common good has ceased to be recognized. When I checked recently, for example, in the State of Connecticut there was a law that pickles must bounce when dropped from a height of one foot; and in South Carolina, it was illegal to dance on Sundays.

I will return to the problem posed by statutes which undermine the common good in Part 2. Here I will merely provide a rather obvious example of how the absence of the final cause can come into play. Suppose there is a law that forbids walking on the lawn of a public building. Now suppose that a large number of people are in the street at the edge of this lawn, and a huge truck comes roaring down the street. In this instance, at

least, we can see that the final cause of the law has ceased to exist. A just civil power would regard the law as null under these circumstances, and would not prosecute people for escaping onto the lawn.

### **The natural law**

If we can see how the material, efficient and final causes of the law affect whether or not a human statement must be considered a law, we should have no trouble grasping the impact of the formal cause. The “formal cause” is the pattern that determines the form taken by something. It is this pattern that distinguishes one thing from another, and all sentient beings recognize such patterns in distinguishing between such things as a horse and a house or monkey and a man. The formal cause determines why something is one thing and not another thing.

Now it so happens that everything that exists is governed by the eternal law of God, which God imparts or communicates to His creation. This is provable by reason, but that must be passed over here to keep our focus. Suffice it to say that because we perceive this law as “built into” the natural world, we call it the natural law. It governs how each natural thing attains the proper ends for which God sustains it in being. We are most familiar with it in thinking about the absolute goods and evils that are constituted within our human nature. Thus, for example, everyone in the world instinctively objects to being treated “unfairly”, as soon as he or she is old enough to recognize that reality—for fairness among human persons is part of the natural law.

Wayward desire, of course, can lead us to obscure or ignore the natural law. We may even be carefully taught (especially in public schools) to obscure or ignore it by those who have imposed specious justifications of particular desires as political requirements. But our instinctive common moral sense is always in evidence, and this moral sense exists only because the natural law is part of our nature. Even without further proof of this truth, it should at least be clear that if the formal cause of a human law is lacking—if, that is, a human enactment violates the very form that makes a law what it is—then this enactment cannot be a law.

In other words, insofar as a human enactment cannot be described as a precept of reason in accordance with the natural law, it is not a law. It may fail because it is not a precept of reason at all, as in the enactment that “henceforth all circles will be square”. Or it may fail because the precept of reason contradicts the natural law, *from which the difference between good and evil must be discerned*. It is the lack of its formal cause which invalidates any human enactment contrary to the natural law—because without its formal cause, no law can exist at all.

Unfortunately, such deficient enactments of governmental authority are still going to be called “laws”, and there will still be consequences for breaking these “laws”. In Part 2 I will consider when it is necessary to run the risk of breaking them, and when it is not.

## What is the law? When can we ignore it? Part 2: The Common Good

In Part 1 of this article, I tried to explain that what we call a law is actually not a law if it lacks one of the four causes necessary to create a law: (1) Public promulgation, by (2) the proper authority, in order (3) to effect the common good, and taking the form of (4) a precept of reason in accordance with the Natural Law. But I also noted that human enactments which do not have all four causes will still often be called laws, and even those who oppose them may well call them “bad laws”. My point was they are not laws at all, which is the main reason we may morally disobey them. It is now time to look at how and when this is so.

I will not discuss unpromulgated enactments, or those promulgated without authority, for most of us do not live under unconstituted bully dictators who punish us for failing to comply with rules which they lacked the authority to promulgate or did not bother to promulgate at all. These things can and do occur. But even in the face of such illegitimacy, citizens are under no moral obligation to disobey the whims of a usurper unless they are instructed to do something which fails the test of the third or fourth causes, that is, something contrary to either the common good or the natural law.

For Catholics, questions about the common good should be far more difficult to resolve than questions about the natural law. This is because we do not have to be philosophers to understand fairly precisely what is enjoined and prohibited by the natural law. The natural law is the eternal law of God in natural things, and the Church is as authoritative in distinguishing moral good and evil as she is in distinguishing the truths of Divine Revelation. Moreover, the Ten Commandments are as fine a summary of the natural law as one could desire. Once we memorize them, we will have questions only around the edges, as it were, questions which the Church typically settles when the need arises.

Still, cases or laws violating both the common good and the natural law require attention. I will devote this second part of the series to the problems posed by enactments which fail to promote the common good, and I will reserve a third and final installment to the generally more severe problem posed by enactments which contradict the natural law itself.

## The problem of the Common Good

While no proposed law for the common good can contradict the natural law—and indeed, if it fails to be a precept of reason in accordance with the natural law, it cannot be a law—a great many measures which do not violate the natural law are advocated for the common good without actually serving it. One of the ways in which such measures can fail to serve the common good is through a tendency to undermine respect for some aspect of the natural law. But, far more often, laws are simply unsuited to their purpose. When lawmakers are deficient in prudence, they often fail to properly assess a need, the reasons the need exists, and/or the means capable of fulfilling that need.

While we are all bound morally to act in ways that are conducive to the common good, the passing of laws is not the prerogative of the private person but of the public authority. Therefore, the primary responsibility for assessing the demands of the common good, and how best to fulfill those demands, lies with the public authority. Under the vast majority of conditions, in fact, it is far more damaging to the common good for many independent individuals to insist on their own legal determinations of how to act than it is to accept a certain amount of inefficiency—but at least a fairly cohesive inefficiency—on the part of the public authority.

Nonetheless, those in positions of public authority are as human as the rest of us, and so even with the best will they are prone to error in how they perceive problems, their causes, and their potential remedies. It is hardly rare that laws are directed at the “wrong” problem or employ the “wrong” means, as far as their purpose of strengthening the common good. But again, this problem must grow fairly severe to justify a refusal of obedience to the law when, though relatively inept, it does not violate the natural law.

Before considering disobedience to such laws, the nature of the common good must be understood. The common good does not consist in the sum total of private goods, as many modern thinkers have thought, and no theories of private goods can alter this reality. Rather, the common good is comprised of those goods which all persons share in common. For example, it is not directly a matter of the common good that persons A, B and C should be unusually secure and very rich; but it is a matter of the common good that systems basic to human security and productivity should be in place for the commonwealth as a whole, so that all may participate in the security and opportunity afforded to the whole.

In pursuit of the common good, therefore, an effective government will make reasonable attempts to provide safety from outside attack, security against crime, and other services and infrastructures in keeping with the basic customs and standards of the

time for securing and promoting the spiritual, moral, intellectual, physical, social, economic and political well-being of the entire community.

### **Disobedience with respect to the common good**

When is it morally acceptable or even morally required—based on the common good—to disobey a civil law? In theory, the answer is the same as always: Whenever the law is not real but apparent. But since I am here excluding those laws which fail to promote the common good by violating the natural law, that judgment is not easy to make. It is just here that the concepts of political advocacy and civil disobedience comes into play, and, in extreme cases, prudent efforts to change the regime.

In considering alternatives, the first requirement is to distinguish prudential matters pertaining to the common good from the strictly moral requirements of the natural law (which I will discuss in Part 3). Every culture tends, in different ways, to foster significant confusion on this score. I am going to take just one prolonged example to make my point.

Thus, we may think that everybody has a natural right to vote (which could be true only if everybody has a moral duty under the natural law to do so). But a moment's reflection on history enables us to see that voting is a feature of certain kinds of political systems but not others, and that many different kinds of political arrangements can be perfectly legitimate for any given community.

Despite frequent exhortations to the contrary, even by many Churchmen, nobody has either a moral obligation to vote or a natural right to do so. If we have the political right to vote, of course, we are bound morally to exercise it for the common good insofar as that is reasonably possible, but even that does not require actual voting, for it may be impossible to exercise it for the common good, or the common good may be better served by protesting the culture's misplaced confidence in voting.

Currently, many Catholic political theorists regard democracy as the political system which best reflects the dignity of all persons while also best implementing the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. But many Catholic political theorists five hundred and more years ago thought the best political system was monarchy because it both possesses the greatest potential for the enactment of just laws and best reflects the rule of God. As Aristotle knew, every system has its good and bad side, and all are provisional in their implementation.

Let me push this example still further. Even with respect to democratic institutions, societies which do not afford the vote to certain classes of citizens are not thereby violating the natural law. Political systems may, without hindrance from the natural law,

be guided by the votes of the barons of the realm, by all those with property, by males of a certain age, by all citizens over a certain age, or by no voting at all.

Again, my point here is not to come to a conclusion about democracy and voting. It is simply to emphasize the need to distinguish questions of the common good—which always depend on prudential judgments within the overall set of circumstances, problems and possibilities—from questions of the natural law, which are matters of absolute right or wrong.

## Conclusion

As a general rule, bad laws with respect to the common good will be met by one of three responses: (a) Counter-advocacy, including the many approaches to changing public opinion and/or electing new public officials; (b) Civil disobedience as a witness of suffering in opposition to the law in question; and/or (c) Revolution, if that is deemed advisable and less damaging than continuing to accept the ill-conceived or ill-executed approach to the common good routinely taken by a particular government.

What is important to understand about such responses is that they must be prudentially determined, and almost never (absent violations of the natural law) entail a universal moral obligation. The situation may be bad enough with respect to the common good to warrant certain kinds of resistance even to the point of revolution, but there is typically no absolute moral obligation to take any of these courses when prudential matters lie at the heart of the disagreement. The course chosen will generally depend on the likelihood of success—for the common good.

On the assumption here that no clear violations of the natural law are involved, we are dealing with something like the situation that prevailed at the time of the American War for Independence. Tories were surely as morally justified in their decision as revolutionaries, though victory always (and usually unjustly) defines treason. In any case, nobody was morally obligated to reject English rule; but arguments could at least be made that it was the best course to follow in securing the common good.

When a law undermines the common good, one may feel called or even obliged in conscience to disobey it, depending on the clarity and the seriousness of the question. Reflective men and women recognize that there are ordinary pluses and minuses with respect to the common good owing to the positive and negative aspects of nearly all human efforts and activities. But legitimate instances of disobedience and resistance can be precipitated by particularly bad enactments which, it may be reasonably argued, have forfeited the character of law.

It is consistent with the difficulty of assessing the common good, however, that in

most cases there can also be legitimate differences of opinion. Rather than being a matter of absolute morality, our decision is more like this: “The situation is very bad. I believe solution X is best of all the possible solutions. I am sincerely convinced in conscience that the best thing I can do to promote the common good is to attempt to implement solution X.” Again, others will disagree about the best course of action, and many will disagree legitimately. But we will find in the final part of this series that such differences cannot be legitimate whenever we are faced with an enactment that violates the natural law.

# What is the law? When can we ignore it? Part 3: Natural Law

The money question in this series on the nature of law is: “When are we morally obliged to disobey a law?” The answer is: “Whenever it commands us to take an action which is morally contrary to the natural law.” As in the preceding two installments, we recognize that such an enactment is not really a law at all, since it is not a precept of reason in accordance with the natural law, which is the formal cause of all law. Instead, it is an enactment masquerading as a law.

We know this without doubt for all enactments contrary to the natural law. Therefore, if an enactment commands us to do something that violates the morality imposed upon us by the natural law, then we are obliged to disobey. Even in so clear and obvious an instance, however, we must consider the various kinds of things a morally bad law might demand in order to distinguish which sorts of demands entail sin for those who comply.

## Irrelevant Objections

Before proceeding to legitimate concerns about the natural law, perhaps I should call attention to the human propensity to raise objections to laws and policies, in the name of absolute morality, which are nothing to the purpose. This is done on all sides. Readers of CatholicCulture.org will be very familiar with the constant invention of alleged rights by those outside the fold, and with the corresponding claims that this or that law is absolutely immoral because it violates one of these rights.

But since our readership tends to be both Catholic and somewhat conservative, I should urge my readers to be sufficiently careful, clear-thinking and self-critical to avoid other forms of rank stupidity. To take just a single example, I would be rich if I had a dollar for every friendly email I have received denouncing as “socialism” any proposed legislation which instituted or adjusted any form of regulatory power over the economy. But while the abolition of private property is contrary to the natural law (and in fact has been condemned by the Church), the mere regulation of this or that aspect of economic affairs is *not* socialism, and cannot be declared immoral simply by uttering that dreaded name.

Suffice it to say, under this heading of “Irrelevant Objections”, that if alleged natural rights do not derive from the moral obligations enjoined by the natural law, they are not

natural rights, and cannot be used to validate or invalidate any human law. Similarly, we need to guard against ignorant shortcuts and/or category mistakes in creating artificial moral imperatives. For other necessary distinctions, I refer back to Part 2, where the subject is not the natural law but the common good.

### **Missing Laws**

It is a different thing entirely to reproach a government for failing to enforce the natural law. But this failure will not ordinarily precipitate a crisis of conscience. There are in fact a great many violations of the natural law which a prudent government will avoid criminalizing. Among other things, the natural law teaches that we owe worship to God and that it is immoral to deliberately frustrate the procreative end of marriage when husband and wife engage in the marital act. But it would be a rare (and imprudent) government that would seek to monitor the private lives of citizens so closely as to criminalize and punish the failure to pray or the failure to be properly open to procreation.

In some cases, of course, we may reasonably advocate that a particular violation of the natural law should be criminalized. For example, though incomprehensible to most in our culture, it is not unreasonable to advocate criminal penalties for producing and marketing various kinds of contraceptives; to prohibit the publication and distribution of unabashed pornography; to make divorce illegal; or to punish the refusal to provide reasonable help to one's destitute parents—all of which mark fairly serious violations of the natural law. But when it comes to criminalizing violations of the natural law, prudence is required. It is neither practical nor beneficial to the common good to make every immoral action also illegal.

More to the point in this discussion, the absence of a law does not require that we do anything contrary to the natural law, and so cannot present us with a crisis of conscience.

### **Restrictive Laws**

The next step up from missing laws would be those laws which do not command what the natural law prohibits but rather restrict what the natural law permits. For example, drinking alcohol and gambling are not intrinsically immoral, but both are prohibited or otherwise restricted in many legitimate instances. Similarly, there is nothing in the natural law to prohibit marriage between what we might call morally eligible males and females. Yet there have been just laws in various times and places which restrict the freedom to enter into civil marriage for various reasons—such as age restrictions and stability requirements, or even restrictions on various forms of inter-marriage to preserve

peace and public safety in unfortunately volatile situations.

Here the rule is fairly simple, at least with respect to absolute morality. What is prescribed by the natural law may not be morally restricted or prohibited; but what is merely permitted by the natural law may be restricted or prohibited for the common good. Gambling and “drinking” (at least in responsible recreational senses) are permitted by the natural law but not enjoined by it. Marriage between otherwise available men and women of differing classes and conditions is permitted by the natural law but, again, not enjoined by it. While restriction of such marriages is foreign to our contemporary way of thinking—and we all enjoy a good love story, if it has a happy ending—various civil restrictions on who can marry whom have been imposed throughout history, without violating the natural law.

Perhaps I should clarify the sense in which I am using the terms *just* and *unjust* in describing laws. I am referring to the intrinsic morality or immorality of the law taken in isolation from other laws. In this sense, a law is just if it does not command something that the natural law prohibits or forbid something that the natural law enjoins. There is a broader sense of justice in law as well, in that it is in some sense unjust—and certainly contrary to the common good—to restrict without a sufficient reason the liberty with which the human person is endowed by his very nature (possessing intellect and free will). But here I have been more interested in whether or not a given law is intrinsically unjust, that is, unjust in and of itself in every situation.

Restrictive laws of many kinds may be passed for good reasons, as beneficial to the common good, or for bad reasons, arising from poor judgment, prejudice or selfish interests. But this is another category for which I refer the reader to the second part of this series, which deals with the prudential judgments necessary to secure the common good. We may oppose one or another of these laws, and even oppose them vehemently and for good reasons, but they do not create in us a crisis of conscience, for they neither force us to do what the natural law prohibits nor prevent us from doing what the natural law enjoins.

### **Permissive Laws**

But what of laws which expressly permit—and so even facilitate—what the natural law forbids. It is just here that we begin to have a serious problem. It is one thing for there to be no law prohibiting some vice; it is quite another for there to be a law which expressly protects a vice. It is even worse to have a law which both protects and actively promotes a vice. And it is still worse to have a law which not only protects and promotes a vice but restricts the efforts of others to combat this vice.

This is the most common moral issue presented to us by Western governments in our time, when awareness of the natural law has been lost, the Christian underpinnings of our civilization have been swept away, and false notions of the good dominate our secular culture. Because our culture is built on ideals of pervasive pleasure and radical human autonomy in a universe regarded as otherwise without meaning, we face growing numbers of morally absurd laws, such as those facilitating abortion, gay marriage, gender changes and other denials of reality in direct contradiction to the natural law.

This is understandable in a culture which takes nothing as “given”, and therefore does not perceive that each person is “gifted” into being and beloved by God. Under such circumstances, human ingenuity in pursuit of human desire becomes a heroic ideal, with no standard of measurement to determine whether a desire is good or bad (and, for those who have eyes to see, causing a marked deterioration in human happiness on all sides as a result). But bad as this is, this *preliminary* state of affairs presents us with a personal challenge more than a crisis of conscience.

In other words, at this *preliminary permissive stage* of the law, we face the challenge imposed on us by two inescapable moral principles: (a) We really are our brother’s keeper; and (b) We are bound to seek the common good. This means that we must find increasingly creative and effective ways to convince others that many modern values are morally wrong, that laws which protect and implement these values are not “precepts of reason in accordance with the natural law”, and that changing such laws (along with the errors they foster and the practices they protect or encourage) will only enhance the common good.

Still, in the case of merely permissive laws, no one is personally forced to disobey a law which otherwise would require him or her to do something immoral, something contrary to the natural law. And so this is not yet the worst case.

## Laws of Compulsion

But when a human enactment enjoins a course of action which violates the natural law, there is no moral choice but to deny that this enactment is a law and, as a totally legitimate consequence, to refuse to comply with it. For in these cases, compliance means to violate the natural law—in other words, to do evil. Thus, for example:

- A doctor may not abort a baby with Down Syndrome, whatever may be prescribed by statute to the contrary.
- A counselor may not encourage a woman who has had “too many” babies to be

sterilized no matter what rules are on the books.

- A charity may not profess openness to gay marriage in order to meet governmental criteria for certain kinds of approval and support.
- A citizen may not denounce to the authorities a nurse who refuses to participate in immoral medical procedures regardless of the regulations.
- Parents may not educate their children to believe what is false on demand of the law, nor accept the State's authority to take their children because they have refused to comply with this law.

In these examples, and many others, civil statutes and regulations not only may be disobeyed but must be disobeyed, no matter what the personal cost. Insofar as they command us to do what is evil.

Here it will be worth mentioning an intermediate type of case\* which does not demand the same stark decision, though it is repugnant enough in itself. I am referring to the various kinds of taxes and other enforced payments (all of which may be regarded as taxes, such as required insurance payments) which can be levied to pay for immoral actions that are protected by law. Here the government is taking our money against our will. We may regard it as a form of theft that we are powerless to prevent, knowing that the funds will go into a pool, some portion of which will be used for evil.

But that is always the case with taxation. Taxation (I dare say invariably) involves remote material cooperation with evil, which is both morally permissible and truly unavoidable in this world. We are not required to go to jail rather than pay a tax which, in part, will be used to fund things that are morally abhorrent, and which in any case will be taken from us. In exactly the same way, we are not required to avoid making a moral purchase from a company which will use some of its funds (through its policies, its officers, its directors and/or its shareholders) for immoral purposes. Nor are we required to do without electricity because the electric company will use some of its revenue to supply power to the local abortion clinic.

Remote cooperation with evil is sinful only when it is formal—that is, when we engage in it because we approve of the evil in question. To avoid remote *material* cooperation with evil, we may choose a course of civil disobedience or of boycotting, depending on what we think will best serve the common good, but such a course is not morally required.

## Conclusion

We are called to act for the common good insofar as we are able to do so. But we are actually and specifically bound to evade or disobey human enactments that would force us personally to perform an action which is contrary to what the natural law requires.

Again, such an enactment is not a precept of reason in accordance with the natural law. It is not a law. It has no moral authority. To do such evil out of a misplaced respect for “the law” is to confuse something with nothing. Such nothingness is not for us: As St. Luke wrote in the Acts of the Apostles (17:28), we live and move and have our being only in the God Who Is.

## Holiness, always personal and over against the world

On almost any day of the year, we will hear reports that religious leaders have urged political leaders to recognize the moral imperative to take particular positions on contested prudential issues. (Urgent appeals to oppose intrinsic evils are actually far less common, but that is not my topic today.) In today's news, a classic example is found in this headline: [Faith leaders call for urgent climate change action](#).

Another example came in an email from a woman religious who supports CatholicCulture.org. She wrote that in her community there is considerable pressure right now to take a position against bombing in Syria:

I always cringe, in religious life, when it comes to the need our sisters feel that all of us should be involved (and speak out, in fact) in the political venue. Case in point today: our leader/sisters are now “united” in questioning the use of force against the Syrian chemical gas attacks....

As I wrote earlier this week in [Political holiness?](#), “While we must not intend or promote political evil, and while we must be good in everything we do, holiness not only can but must be separated from politics. It must not be conceived in political terms.”

There are two reasons for this. The one I attempted to express in my previous essay is that most of the issues brought up in the political order are at once large, complex and legitimately controversial (as all prudential questions are)—so much so, in fact, that only three things about them are certain: (a) We do not have reliable and complete sources of information about them; (b) Even if we did we could not possibly fully understand their causes and solutions; and, (c) We cannot accurately predict the side-effects of whatever policies we implement. (Again, please note that I am priscinding from addressing intrinsic moral evils in this essay.)

The result of the politicization of holiness, then, is that false moral imperatives are constantly in play. We are told that we *absolutely must* advocate X or protest Y. And since we do not fully understand the nature, circumstances, and causes of either X or Y, nor the full impact of our proposed solutions, we latch on to one or more of the false certainties we find floating around in a malformed culture. More often than not, we take the positions we have been told to take by whatever public opinion is most fashionable.

In one respect or another, then, we are nearly always at least partially wrong.

### **Personal, not political**

I have said that we must always be good, even when acting politically. But political decisions are nearly always prudential judgments based on incomplete information. Moreover, their purpose is only ostensibly to promote the common good. There may be any number of nationally, politically or personally selfish interest in play which are cleverly masked beneath the rhetoric and data supporting one position or another. It is hard enough to differentiate these things in small communities, even in families—indeed, even within ourselves. It is all but impossible to do so with certainty within large systems, in which almost nobody has either first-hand experience or comprehensive knowledge.

Finally, politics embraces the “art of the possible” for whole societies. We must assess the capacity for both goodness and sacrifice on the part of the larger community. Politics imposes change, restriction and sacrifice not primarily on ourselves, but upon those for whom we presume to decide.

This brings us to the second reason for not conceiving holiness in political terms. Holiness is a *personal* characteristic not a *political* posture. The work of holiness must be done quietly within ourselves, and it is already hard enough to assess our own capacity for goodness and sacrifice in giving direction to our own lives. This is why one of the best parts of Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation [Gaudete et Exsultate](#) is the section in Chapter 1 (“The Call to Holiness”) entitled “For You Too”. Here are some brief excerpts:

15. Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to him in every situation. Do not be dismayed, for the power of the Holy Spirit enables you to do this, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life (cf. Gal 5:22-23).

16. This holiness to which the Lord calls you will grow through small gestures. Here is an example: a woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbour and they begin to speak, and the gossip starts. But she says in her heart: “No, I will not speak badly of anyone”. This is a step forward in holiness.

17. At times, life presents great challenges. Through them, the Lord calls us anew to a conversion that can make his grace more evident in our lives, “in order that we may share his holiness” (Heb 12:10). At other times, we need only find a more perfect way of doing what we are already doing: “There are inspirations that tend

solely to perfect in an extraordinary way the ordinary things we do in life”.

18. In this way, led by God’s grace, we shape by many small gestures the holiness God has willed for us, not as men and women sufficient unto ourselves but rather “as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet 4:10).

On the same personal level, there is the following from the subsection entitled “Activity that Sanctifies”:

28. Needless to say, anything done out of anxiety, pride or the need to impress others will not lead to holiness. We are challenged to show our commitment in such a way that everything we do has evangelical meaning and identifies us all the more with Jesus Christ.

And finally, from Chapter 3 (“In the Light of the Master”, on the Beatitudes), Pope Francis emphasizes the following in the section on “The Great Criterion”:

98. If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?

Holiness is tested not through our political response to statistical problems, but through our personal response to the people we actually encounter in our daily life.

## **Conclusion**

We need to meditate on the fundamentally personal and even private dimensions of holiness—the battles we fight within our own hearts, the results of which directly impact our personal relationships. Most of us will have very few opportunities to grow in holiness through political advocacy. Moreover, whenever our advocacy is merely an echo of a position approved by our culture of reference—to which we are drawn by our desire to see and be seen—the impact will be just the opposite. We should leave that for the moments when we can bear the kind of witness that leads to worldly derision and

condemnation.

Instead, we must capture the spirit of the Pope's closing paragraph:

177. It is my hope that these pages will prove helpful by enabling the whole Church to devote herself anew to promoting the desire for holiness. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us a fervent longing to be saints for God's greater glory, and let us encourage one another in this effort. In this way, we will share a happiness that the world will not be able to take from us.

Note that the Pope speaks of happiness, not satisfaction. Holiness is *always* personally costly and *always* over against the world. This must be grasped in the Biblical sense, that is, in contrast to the dominant worldly opinions from which we derive so much reassurance and pride—and through which we are seduced into distancing ourselves ever further from the Kingdom of God.

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<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1546>

# What IS the proper relationship between Church and State?

My last commentary ([Crosses on public buildings: Yes or No?](#)) indirectly raised the question of the right relationship between Church and State in a well-ordered society. This is a relationship that has been deeply distorted by the division of Christianity in the sixteenth century, and further distorted by religious conflict around the world. It is fairly easy to settle in theory, but much harder in practice.

In the West, we now take for granted what we call the “separation of Church and State”. Surprisingly, this concept actually began as a teaching of the Catholic Church. Initially the issue was framed with reference to Catholicism as “the Church” in combination with any State—not with reference to one State in combination with many “churches” or religions.

The Catholic position has always been what Pope Gelasius described in the late fifth century as the doctrine of “the two swords”. The State (the temporal order) is a natural society over which government presides with a natural authority, exercising that authority for the common good of the community it rules. This is the “temporal sword”. The Church, on the other hand, is a supernatural society which presides with a supernatural authority over souls, exercising that authority for the spiritual welfare of the community, both as a contribution to the common good and so that all its members may attain their final end, which is eternal life with God. This is the “spiritual sword.”

It follows that the Church is our authority for defining moral truth (which is inscribed in natural reality by the Creator) and also the truth which God discloses to us solely through Revelation. To expound these truths is the purpose of what we call “Christian doctrine”. It also follows that the State is our authority for devising and implementing the measures necessary to enforce the moral law most effectively for the good of the commonwealth, as well as the many other measures which will be needed to secure and advance the common good of all under its jurisdiction.

We should notice here that in moral analysis—in distinguishing the principles of right and wrong—the Church’s authority is absolute, whereas the State’s authority is prudential. In other words, the Catholic Church alone can teach with certainty the difference between good and evil. But for the right ordering of a commonwealth, it is the State which must make the prudential judgments about how and when moral behavior

ought to be encoded into law, and how and when the breaches of those laws are to be punished temporally. These prudential decisions are aimed at the maintenance of the order required for the natural common good of all, regardless of each person's attitudes and beliefs.

To put the matter even more simply, the proper relationship between Church and State in the natural governance of the human community is this: The Church must determine the moral ends of natural government and the moral means by which natural governments may justly rule. The State, on the other hand, must govern prudentially within the framework provided by this absolute moral understanding. (I should also note that it is because all can recognize these moral principles in the natural law that they may be justly imposed on everyone, regardless of religious beliefs or other personal "points of view".)

### **The Problem of Pluralism**

It is not the job of the State to determine what is right and wrong but rather what works best to advance the common good within a prior understanding of right and wrong. In the same way, it is not the job of the Church to decide the most effective means for protecting and promoting the common good of society as a whole, but rather simply to insist on the moral framework within which these prudential decisions must be made.

In a nutshell, morally speaking, both totalitarianism and theocracy are out of the question.

Unfortunately, while it really is this doctrine of the two swords which ensures a proper understanding of the separation of Church and State, the concept cannot be correctly applied without a proper understanding of "Church". With the decline of a proper understanding of "Church" in the West, separation of Church and State has typically degenerated into a refusal to accept "religious values" in political life. This concept of "separation" is easily exploited by civil government, which is constantly tempted to increase its own power.

Most people can grasp as a kind of general principle that values ought to be derived from a transcendent perspective—ideally an authentic religion that really does convey God's will, or at least a competent and disinterested philosophy. Similarly we can see in the abstract that one of the stupidest and most dangerous errors possible is to imagine that values ought to be created by political authority. All the totalitarianisms since the French Revolution have been rooted in this fundamental absurdity, with the most disastrous consequences for the common good.

But this whole issue becomes confusing when there is no generally recognized

religious authority, that is, no clear conception of “Church”. And it becomes utterly chaotic when people come to believe that the values offered by political authority represent the will of the people. This may well be the greatest mythical piety of modern politics. On the one hand, the idea that “the people” are the ultimate *source* of moral authority is both philosophically absurd and totally unworkable; on the other, the idea that government typically rules in accordance with the values of “the people” depends on definitions of “the people” which can never be adequately tested or proved.

It has been truly said that nature abhors a vacuum. What has gradually happened over the past several hundred years in the West is that the failure of people to agree on their religious beliefs—a failure which must always deeply disturb the cohesiveness of a culture—has led to the usurpation of moral authority by the State. The result is the generation of values through propaganda.

### **The Need to Rethink Everything**

I hope the reader will see several reasons in this essay to explain why it is so important for human communities to seek, find and adhere to a source of moral authority that transcends the State. For a healthy human community, this source cannot assume the power of the State (as in a theocracy), nor can the State assume the powers of a real moral authority (as in totalitarianism).

In the West today we find a curious state of affairs. Church and State are supposedly separated. But in fact public opinion is very selectively horrified by apparent breaches of this misunderstood separation. Public outrage is conveniently generated whenever the Church seeks to correct the mistaken moral values created and implemented by the State, but the public remains perfectly serene whenever the State makes up moral values out of whole cloth in defiance of what the Church has taught over two millennia (and in defiance of what had been largely defined for far longer, when we consider Jewish history, the teachings of many other religions, and the natural law tradition inherited from the Greeks). This tells us something about the temptation to totalitarianism which is so characteristic of the secular West.

Finally, I hope also that the reader will also see several reasons here to rethink the Church-State question in its original terms, that is, as pertaining to the relationship between the Catholic Church and all human governments, and not to some secular theory of human government in relationship with every religion in the world. Without a Catholic culture, we can only muddle along, slogging through competing interests, for there is no recognition of “Church” as a source of absolute value. We may glimpse some general principles; indeed, we should be able to glimpse the natural law. But these

glimpses cannot be anchored by an authentic moral and spiritual authority.

There is only a cacophony of competing voices. Spiritual chaos cannot guide the temporal sword; it can only unleash it.

It is only through Catholicism that a proper understanding of Church and State can be grasped. This is why no lasting political good will be achieved in our time without both widespread conversion and a vibrant and widely recognized Church. Separation of Church and State is the right idea, but for it to work there must be not only a recognized State but a recognized Church. The doctrine of the two swords is the right doctrine. But its first principle is that we need both swords.

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## Discernment is important, so let's not make a mockery of it.

It is easy to make jokes about the contemporary Vatican effort to eliminate problems through “discernment”, as if discernment by itself can eliminate objective patterns of evil. Part of this is simply the tendency of Church officials to reflect instantly the favorite ideas and expressions of the current pope, which is nothing new. But the attempt to *discern problems away*, instead of using discernment to see more clearly how best to address them, carries a risk of confusing processes with results. Unfortunately, a justified reaction to this confusion can lead to a counter-temptation, which is to dismiss the value of discernment altogether.

The need for discernment pervades all of life, and discernment can take many forms. For example, we should seek to discern our vocations, and in many situations we must apply ourselves fairly strenuously to discerning God's will. Authentic discernment, in the Catholic sense, is a spiritual insight aided by grace, closely akin to wisdom. But the issue today is the attempt to use discernment as a generalized solution to problems arising from objective evils—evils we are already publicly bound by God Himself to recognize, and therefore evils which cannot be “discerned” into anything else.

### A category mistake

I would suggest that problematic attitudes toward discernment today are rooted in our culture's predominant tendency to separate (rather than distinguish) the body from the soul, viewing the soul or psyche as the essence of the person and the body as a mere instrument. Or, to put the matter another way, we tend to separate “what we do” from “who we are”. Perhaps the deepest malaise of our culture today is the insistence on thinking of ourselves as good persons without seeing any need to correct our bad behavior.

This bifurcation of the human person has reached the point where criteria aptly applied to the mentally ill are routinely applied to those with normal human intellectual and psychological capabilities. Thus, we may say of someone afflicted with manic depression that neither pole of behavior accurately represents “who he is”, and we would be right. But when someone engages in behavior that is within his or her normal range of control, we cannot say this. To do so destroys the very foundation of personal growth,

for we must affirm either that a person's choices do not both reflect and further shape a person's character, or that the person has no responsibility for how he or she behaves—no responsibility for his or her own sin and virtue before God and man.

Even without particular theories, the sad truth is that we humans have always played this deceitful game in one way or another, most frequently by refusing to challenge the evil a person does because he or she is “nice” or “important” or “fashionable” or “powerful”. This is another way of saying we regard many evils as inconsequential when weighed against personal attractiveness, personal status, or cultural approval. And what we find in the new theories of discernment offered today is that the situations typically cited as amenable to this fresh discernment involve evils which are broadly (and erroneously) accepted in our culture as either inevitable or good. This is a striking observation. How can there not be a certain gamesmanship in play?

The effort to turn evil into good, of course, is an abuse of discernment, and my point here is not that discernment is bad, but that discernment, like any other tool, must be applied to the right questions and in the right way. In assessing the personal deficiencies which underlie objectively bad human behavior, we must discern many things: Is the person psychologically disturbed? Does he understand that what he is doing is evil? Has he been coerced to do the evil in question? Does he do evil primarily out of weakness or from a real determination to do harm? What are the motives? Is the transgression inadvertent or deliberate?

In addition to this discernment of intentions and circumstances, we must also discern something about the objective character of the transgression. Is the action in question intrinsically evil? Is it something that is wrong only under certain circumstances? Is it a violation of a rule of good order, but with little or no intrinsic moral dimension (like exceeding the speed limit)? Is it a justified defiance of an immoral rule or decree?

Discernment is necessary as well in determining the punishment, or suspension of punishment, for evil (or at least legally prohibited) actions. All human courts make efforts at such discernment, and rightly so. Circumstances are taken into account, as are the apparent motives of the offender; an effort is also made to assess the danger posed to the community by various punitive or non-punitive decisions. This must be discerned not only with respect to the future actions of the offender but with respect to a judgment's impact on the community of reference, and what the judgment communicates to that community concerning the values at stake.

In other words, discernment is essential to understanding the total context in which bad behavior has manifested itself, so that the correction can be applied in the manner that most effectively addresses the sources and results of that behavior. But discernment

cannot be used to argue that the objective evil done is not evil or that there is no duty to recognize and correct the pattern of evil on the part of those involved in it.

### Two common examples

As quick examples, we may compare two problems that have been much in the news in recent years: The case of Catholics who are invalidly married and the case of bishops (notably in China) who have taken office illicitly (and so been excommunicated). The first case involves decisions and commitments a person has made which violate both the moral law and the laws of the Church, including a repudiation of the Church's foundational sacramental authority, arising most commonly from relatively selfish desires affecting personal satisfaction which ought to have been held in check. The second case involves decisions and commitments a person has made which violate the laws of the Church, a violation which could be embraced either from a desire for some sort of gain or in an ill-judged effort to find a way to more effectively minister to larger numbers of Catholics within the coercive structures of a hostile State.

Now, it is clear that the first case will require repentance which expresses itself in an exterior transformation, a transformation that enables the person to live henceforth in conformity to the moral law as well as with full acceptance of the sacramental authority of the Church. Just as clearly, the second case does not *necessarily* require either repentance or a clear change of life, but rather a formal commitment to papal authority over the episcopate going forward, accepted by Rome, so that the ecclesiastical penalties may be lifted. We might note in passing that there have been many conflicts between Church and State over the appointment of bishops, and these have been resolved in a wide variety of ways over the centuries, with numerous concordats to prove it.

Moreover, many men have been made bishops without being deeply committed to the interests of the Church (consider the younger sons of the nobility in the Middle Ages) and with little evidence of holiness of life. On many occasions, Rome has decided to accept inferior candidates owing to political or cultural exigencies which would have made pressing for better bishops extremely disruptive and even dangerous to the Church. So the two cases are very different in their doctrinal, moral, legal and prudential dimensions.

We can see also that the impact of "normalization" on the community of reference is potentially quite different in these two cases as well. In cases of invalid marriages, fidelity in key matters of faith and morals may be weakened in the community at large if there appears to be normalization without either (1) a specific ecclesiastical judgment which makes the matter moot; or (2) a change in living arrangements which

demonstrates a renewed moral and ecclesial commitment. Yet little or none of this may be visible in any given case to those outside the family arrangement in question (especially in cases in which the brother-and-sister arrangement is adopted). Apart from the family and the pastor, knowledge of the circumstances will be limited.

Clearly, except with certain high profile cases, the impact on the community is affected more by an overall perception of how the Church handles these cases, rather than by individual situations about which we may not know enough to judge. In this case, then, we may say that the moral and spiritual correction of the invalidly married couple is more significant than the perceptions of the community at large. At the same time, because of the very serious spiritual and moral character of the familial issues at stake, the solutions open to the men and women in question are not only few but difficult to embrace.

In the case of illicitly elevated bishops, on the other hand—and again with China specifically in mind—the public impact on the community is clear and immediate in each case. Everyone knows which bishops have remained faithful to Rome and which have not. Some Catholics have taken considerable risks to align themselves with the authentic Catholic episcopacy and with Rome, while others have slipped more comfortably into the “patriotic church”.

We see here again how much discernment is required. For example, it is quite possible to determine that, for the sake of a better future relationship between Church and State, the disobedience of some “patriotic bishops” could be forgiven and the penalties removed. But even so, there must be a discernment of the impact of such a decision on the Church as a whole, and particularly on the most faithful and most deeply committed members of the Church militant in the affected region. Yet because of the primarily legal character of the objective spiritual and moral issues at stake, a greater breadth of solutions is possible, with potentially little effort on the part of the men in question, ranging from permanent rejection and exclusion from the Church to the immediate enjoyment of full episcopal rights and privileges.

### **Discernment does not eliminate sin**

Discernment helps us to identify and combat sin while preserving the life of the sinner and protecting the faithful as a whole. It helps us reach others more effectively with the primal realities of Divine judgment and Divine mercy. It depends absolutely on the truth, but the ability to see how best to serve the truth in given circumstances can vary widely from one person to another. Thus discernment involves a prayerful effort to see as God sees and judge as God judges, but without the assurance that any particular person will

discern rightly all aspects of the problem in question. Morally and spiritually, such discernment is aimed toward uncovering the neuralgic points and negative attitudes which prevent a proper embrace of God's will, the better to help those involved to see the truth and make spiritual progress. When this discernment involves prudential decisions affecting individuals, families and communities, it must also include a weighing of goods and outcomes in order to maximize the good of all while minimizing harm.

But discernment must always be guided by the unchanging principles of Catholic faith and morals which form the basic structure of the Christian life. These and the grace to embrace them are the "givens" which discernment seeks to maximize in the lives of all who are subjected to its scrutiny, including ourselves, personally, in prayer.

The one thing that discernment cannot do is declare black to be white, by which I mean discernment cannot resolve a problem by pretending that sin is virtue. Whenever we are dealing with a situation predicated on an objective moral disorder, the core of discernment is to discover the best way to lead those involved to repent of their sin and give that part of their lives to Christ in His Church. In these cases, the question discernment must answer is how we may bring those who have weakened or broken their communion with the Church to recognize what they have lost, express sorrow, and form a firm purpose of amendment. Through discernment, we must seek to understand the sin, its causes, and the most apt counsel and assistance for the road back.

It is a sad circumstance that makes it so easy today to joke about discernment. But it would be a shame to forget what discernment is for, how often it is required, and why we should commit ourselves to it—both to know ourselves better and to assist more effectively others who need understanding, spiritual help, and sound advice. The tragedy is not that we must use discernment but that we should make a mockery of it. We mock discernment whenever we offer hasty, unsympathetic and ill-targeted counsel, but also, and especially in the Church today, whenever we conceal the spiritual and moral conditions which are seriously harming those whom it is the whole purpose of discernment to serve.

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## “If bloodless means are sufficient”: The devil of capital punishment is in the details

In [yesterday's commentary](#) on the recent change to the Catechism on the use of the death penalty, I passed over fairly quickly the tricky question of when the death penalty may be necessary to protect the community. This is an interesting question because it is not clear exactly what the official teaching of the Church intends to convey when it refers to improvements in our penal systems. But since the Magisterium is unlikely to clarify this any time soon, I raise it primarily as an academic question. It is hardly essential study material for all readers, and it is not for the faint of heart!

I begin by recalling that no catechism, even one issued by the Church, is a Magisterial source of Catholic doctrine. Rather, it is a secondary compendium of that doctrine, which cannot cover everything, but which is intended, at least, to be reasonably accurate in what it includes, even if not completely free from confusing language and occasional mistakes. This realization leads us to go back to the last Magisterial text which addressed the issue of the death penalty: Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life)*, issued in March of 1995.

The timing with respect to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is interesting. Readers may recall that the Catechism was originally issued in French in 1994. There followed a period of review, reflection and correction, after which a definitive Latin text was issued in 1997. During the interim, the original text of the Catechism on the death penalty was revised, so that there is a somewhat circular relationship with the 1995 encyclical, in that the encyclical quotes the Catechism before the definitive Latin edition was published, but when it was published, we find that the Catechism had also picked up a revision based on the encyclical. (You can see this in a close examination of number 56, including its footnotes.)

### Documentary magisterial weight

The first thing to note is that an encyclical which quotes a catechism to make a point carries a Magisterial weight which a catechism lacks on its own. This is inescapably so because an encyclical is a Magisterial text and a catechism is not. But if you are not yet

confused, go to the head of the class.

What is quoted from the original Latin text of the Catechism in the encyclical—and therefore given a Magisterial weight that the newest formulation lacks—is the passage in the offset quote below. “In any event,” says John Paul in *Evangelium vitae*, “the principle set forth in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remains valid:”

If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person. [56]

This is one of the two quotes which form the basis for my observation elsewhere that Pope St. John Paul II developed the Church’s teaching on capital punishment by emphasizing that it may be used morally only when actually necessary to protect the community.

I have not quoted the Latin (always important when investigating close questions), but I have also seen this passage translated with the words “will limit” instead of “must limit”, which gives it significantly less force as a formal moral teaching. But earlier in the same section 56, the Pope had made the following points (which, taken together, form one continuous passage):

- “The primary purpose of the punishment which society inflicts is ‘to redress the disorder caused by the offence’.” [the quotation is from the Catechism]
- “Public authority must redress the violation of personal and social rights by imposing on the offender an adequate punishment for the crime”
- “as a condition for the offender to regain the exercise of his or her freedom.”
- “In this way authority also fulfils the purpose of defending public order and ensuring people’s safety,”
- “while at the same time offering the offender an incentive and help to change his or her behaviour and be rehabilitated [this sentence is footnoted to, but not quoted from, the Catechism].”

Now, with this background, the Pope writes the following—without referencing the Catechism or any other document, so this is “pure encyclical”:

It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society.

This is the second statement that causes me to argue Pope John Paul developed the doctrine on capital punishment. In any case, to demonstrate the somewhat circular relationship between the encyclical and the Catechism, I note that the Pope then ends his discussion by writing “Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent”—which is the famous prudential statement which was added to the official Latin edition of the Catechism from *Evangelium vitae*.

Once again, however, it is the encyclical, not the Catechism, that is a Magisterial document.

### **Textual magisterial weight**

As I indicated, the text of the encyclical (including any quotes from the Catechism) carries a Magisterial weight that a catechism necessarily lacks. But not all sentences in an encyclical carry the same weight. *Evangelium vitae* is a very long treatise on the gospel of life. It draws the Catholic idea of “the culture of life” from Scripture, explains the nature of the human person and human dignity, and discusses most or perhaps even all of the neuralgic points which plagued society at the time it was written: Not only capital punishment, but contraception, sterilization, abortion, euthanasia, suicide and more. In such a broad and lengthy document, we cannot expect definitive statements about everything.

Indeed, a critical question arises with every exercise of the ordinary magisterium: When is the Pope simply discussing and explaining various issues so that we may see how they unfold and how they fit together in the Christian scheme, and when does he intend to definitively teach some particular point so that there can be no doubt that it is stated precisely as intended with full Magisterial authority?

This interpretive problem—that we often cannot identify, in a long discussion, which points the pope clearly means formally to teach—explains why we commonly say that we know something is infallible either when the pope teaches it in an extraordinary way (making his intention crystal clear) or when the same point is *repeatedly stated* over time in ordinary Magisterial texts. In the second case, it is the repetition of a teaching which makes it clear this is something that the Magisterium really intends to articulate.

We can see this distinction at work in the text of *Evangelium vitae* itself. The Pope's treatment of many items follows an ordinary manner of discussion, attempting to unfold a fairly comprehensive Catholic understanding of each topic, and of the interconnections among the whole range of topics. But some issues are treated very differently. For example, when it comes to abortion, which *Evangelium vitae* discusses at great length, the Pope concludes:

Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and unchangeable. Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine, I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church. [62]

It is this kind of extraordinarily intensive language which leaves no doubt as to a pope's intention to formally and officially teach something very specific that must be received as absolutely true—that is, an infallible teaching.

### **Interpreting the Magisterium on the death penalty**

It is very important to note that we have no such language anywhere concerning recent developments on the question of capital punishment. This is one reason it is not yet perfectly clear what we are required by the Church to believe. (Another reason, the one I emphasized in my previous essay, is the prudential character of some of the points at issue.) In yesterday's commentary, I reiterated my 2004 claim that Pope Saint John Paul II had developed Catholic doctrine on the death penalty by clearly indicating that it may be morally used by the civil authority only when necessary to protect the community. Even though we have no "extraordinary" language to that effect, this is a judgment I expect to be proved correct over time, especially when we trace over the number of times

the point has been made by the ordinary magisterium.

Even so, this leaves the question with which I began today's essay: What does the Church mean by "necessary"? Or to accurately cite the texts in question, how is this moral restriction on the civil authority's use of the death penalty intended to be understood, as stated in the two quotations from *Evangelium vitae*, repeated below:

- "It is clear that, for these purposes to be achieved, the nature and extent of the punishment must be carefully evaluated and decided upon, and ought not go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society." [EV 56]
- "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons, public authority must limit itself to such means, because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person." [EV 56, quoted from the Catechism]

What does it mean that the civil authority's option for capital punishment may not be used morally "except in cases of absolute necessity", that is, "when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society", that is, when "bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of persons"?

Note that I am deliberately leaving aside the whole question of whether capital punishment is necessary as a deterrent. Most studies suggest it is not, but that subject is hardly completely closed. Nonetheless, this essay concerns the need to protect the community from criminals already apprehended.

Thus, the question I am raising turns on the meaning of phrases which, I would argue, cannot be understood in an absolute sense. It is very difficult to imagine, after all, that there could be any condition at any time in history under which the civil authority could not figure out *some* way to protect society from a criminal without executing the criminal. I suggest, therefore, that here we must distinguish, as we do in end-of-life decisions, between ordinary and extraordinary means.

I consider it unlikely that the Church intends to teach that the civil authority must *go to all conceivable lengths* to protect the community from a murderer without executing the murderer, any more than the medical community must *go to all conceivable lengths* to keep every sick or dying citizen alive as long as humanly possible. The very fact that

these statements of Pope St. John Paul II rely so heavily on the modern context in their formulation would suggest that they are to be understood in a particular framework of normal possibilities.

## Conclusion

Therefore, it seems to me that there must be some distinction between measures that are ordinarily and reasonably possible in a society's particular circumstances, and measures which would create a significant burden for that society. And if I am correct in this assumption, then the teaching on the obligations of the civil order in this matter—just as with certain questions of medical ethics—are somewhat of a moving target, a target which comes into focus at least partially through a pragmatic lens applied to relative questions of feasibility. I grant that capital punishment and medical ethics approach the question from opposite ends. The decision to actively prolong life and the decision to avoid executing a criminal are not the same. But the question is at least similar: To what lengths is the civil order required to go to avoid a person's death?

This is an issue that the Church has not settled. It is open for speculation and debate. Yet it lies at the root of the problem of capital punishment which has lately been so much in the news. I warned at the outset that this issue is currently largely of academic interest. Scholars better versed than I in the entire subject will have to develop consistent moral theories and hope that they are not ruled out by future Magisterial determinations.

But the takeaway point for everyone, I believe, is that while we know enough to take a practical position on the use of capital punishment, the theoretical questions surrounding the death penalty are far from closed.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=751>

## Why do Catholics speak so often of “the Church” instead of “Christ”?

In a recent discussion of the mission of CatholicCulture.org, an interesting question came up: Why do we have the word “Catholic” in our name, and not the word “Christ”? Similarly, one of the mission slogans I use frequently is to “enrich faith, strengthen the Church, and form Catholic culture”. Why do I include the terms “Church” and “Catholic”, and not the names “Christ” or “Jesus”?

The answer to this question actually marks a significant difference between Catholics and Protestants, who more frequently mention “the Lord Jesus”. Never mind for the moment that Protestants can hardly refer to “the Church”, since they do not have a “church”. While all Protestants are baptized Catholic, as Protestants they have no apostolicity, no succession in grace and orders, and no Christic unity of governance. The Orthodox can properly refer to themselves as “a church”; Protestant bodies are churches only in a more conventional sense. But such “churches” are not really churches, but sects or gatherings or communities or fellowships.

We might almost call them “prayer groups”. But there is a deeper issue.

Catholics recognize the Church AS Christ. The membership of the Church makes up Christ’s mystical body, and the Risen Christ is the Church’s head. The Church is sinful in her members, but she is both sinless and an infinite font of goodness and supernatural life in her institutional Christic essence—institutional in the same sense as the sacraments, that is, instituted by Christ to give grace. Just as we really and truly encounter Christ in each of the sacraments, so do we encounter Him constantly in the ultimate sacrament of His Church. Thus, the Catholic Church is not only one, holy, catholic and apostolic: She is Christ present in the world, present in what He has ordained to be His fullest mode until His Second Coming.

In other words, the Catholic Church is Our Lord and Savior’s preeminent presence here and now on this earth. This is a far greater presence, and a far more tangible one, than is found “wherever two or three are gathered in my name”. This does not mean it is wrong to speak of “Jesus” or “Christ” or “the Lord”, but it does mean that to do so apart from the Church or to the exclusion of the Church is a terrible impoverishment of His Presence.

This is true irrespective of the sins of the Church’s members. It is as true in the age

of sex abuse as it was in all the great ages of doctrinal ferment, including our own, when priests and laity alike have agitated for shameful revisions of the Word of God, ultimately splintering away to do their own thing. And it was as true in the era of episcopal abuse of political power five hundred to a thousand years ago as it was in the age of itinerant Gnostic preachers two millennia ago, just after the Resurrection. The Body of Christ is certainly wounded and disfigured. But it remains His Body. There is no other.

I am grateful to R. R. Reno, the editor of *First Things*, for reminding me of this only the other day. (Indeed, this seems to be my day for being indebted to a particular issue of *First Things*. I already mentioned two articles in the August/September issue in the piece I posted earlier, [The Managerial class: Top companies are usually our enemies](#).) In his essay on “[Sacramental Realism](#)” in the Public Square section, Reno notes that the Council of Trent made precisely this point about Christ’s presence in the Church in its sixteenth-century response to the Protestant Revolt:

Years ago, while studying the Council of Trent, the authoritative Catholic response to the Reformation, I came to see that the council mirrored back to Protestants their most potent charge, which is that Catholics rely on their own “works” rather than trusting in the promise of Christ. The fathers at Trent did not dispute the *solus Christus* premise of the Reformation. Instead, the Tridentine response chides Protestantism for limiting the power of God’s love. When Jesus says to his followers, “I will be with you until the end of the age,” he meant to be true to that promise. The visible Church and her sacramental system incarnate Christ anew.

As Reno says in conclusion: “This is why Catholics often use the word ‘Church’ where Protestants typically say ‘Christ’.”

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/the-city-gates.cfm?id=1631>

## I'd rather be an angel...or would I?

*For CJP who, with the courage of friendship, has advised me to have a heart.*

On the way to Mass this morning, I was reflecting (as is my wont) on the idiocy of all those who do not see things as I do. Fortunately, I find it difficult to maintain a *completely* self-righteous posture in my sleepy meditations prior to the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and I tried to turn these thoughts in a more fruitful direction. And so, of course, I put God to the question: “Why are we humans destined to follow such a bumbling path toward union with You? Wouldn’t it be better for us to be made like the angels, so we can see everything clearly at a glance, and choose just once accordingly?”

Now there’s a question.

### **An anecdote! An anecdote!**

To attempt an answer, of course, we must decide what we mean by “better”. But surely this is fairly simple. “Better” can only mean more conducive to the Creator’s purpose, which is our union with Himself. Now many people reading this will doubtless say, “I registered my ‘yes’ to that union long ago. So why the unceasing delays, why the constant holdups?” In my own case, I was (as I mentioned) thinking about how clear-headed I am compared with so many others. I like to think some of my readers—mostly highly-committed Catholics—have the same thought from time to time. Therefore, to help all comers probe into it a little more deeply, I shall recount, without any additional charge whatsoever, an anecdote.

The day after the weekend is Monday, right? I call as witnesses to my defense all those who answer “yes”, for on Mondays my habitual pew at Mass changes. The Monday morning Mass at my parish is the one attended by the students and staff of Seton School, at which my wife teaches, and for which she supervises the student lectors. On other weekdays my position is two spots over in the fourth pew just to the left of the center aisle, with my wife in spot one as is doubtless her due. (And, no, I do *not* like it when I cannot claim *my* habitual place at Mass.) But on Mondays I am far back in an isolated corner of the church not occupied by Setonites, while my wife is up front, close to the lectern, in the lector pew.

So there I was this morning (which my many witnesses will testify was the morning after the weekend), in my obscure place reflecting on how very clear-headed I was about life. Suddenly my wife (who drives to Mass separately before going off to school) leaned

in from the aisle and whispered, “Are you hiding from me today?” To which, sharp as a whip, I replied, “No, you have the Monday Seton Mass today, so you are up front, I am back here.”

But she just smiled and (without, I am happy to say, the least asperity) remarked: “Actually, today is Tuesday. Yesterday was Labor Day. It was a three day weekend.”

### **Human fogginess**

The gap between those of us who are quite sure we have our act together and those who even more surely do not—that gap is not quite the chasm some of us imagine.

Spiritually, I grant that this gap cannot be more significant. It is the difference between knowing and loving God and not knowing or not loving God, or both. But in terms of our ability to be muddled in all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle ways which make our knowing and loving imperfect, the gap is relatively small, and even constantly shifting.

Now, if we were like angels and therefore unmuddled, the gap would be instantaneous, vast, and constant. Under these circumstances, the question each of us must ask ourselves is simple: In the first moment of my existence, would I have chosen—with a proper valuation of my own worth—to be in union with God? Those of us who do not know Monday from Tuesday—and I do not claim anyone else has this problem!—need to be careful about how we answer, not only for ourselves, but for all those whose experience of their habitation in the universe is not ours to know.

But I can ask myself at least two further questions. When did I first essentially recognize the reality of God and Who He is? Once I was clear about that, did I ever sin again? The answer will be obvious to each of us, but at least we can claim truly that our clarity of knowledge and firmness of will is not angelic. And surely, if we possessed that clarity and firmness....

### **Angelic vision**

We do not know how many angels chose to reject God, but in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation, we are given at least a symbolic clue. The Devil is identified with a red dragon whose “tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth” (v. 4). Through the good angels under the leadership of St. Michael, the dragon “was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (v. 9). It is hard not to understand “stars” as “angels” in this passage. We can guess, then, that huge numbers of angels chose a life apart from their Creator—exercising free will in response to the angelic nature’s instantaneous clarity of knowledge.

If so many angels were lost, we would be foolish indeed to assume that their mode of

salvation is superior to our own, in the sense that we might wish for a different nature, so that we can translate our present inclinations into a more efficient result. In the present moment, readers may not see this folly; after all, it would be a churlish soul indeed who did not experience an upsurge of piety while reading one of my essays. But what of so many other occasions in our lives? I refer to those times when we have, with at least tolerably clear heads, chosen something bad for our relationship with God, or those times when we simply did not really know, in the life of the spirit, the difference between Monday and Tuesday—and so did not take our proper place in the body of the faithful here on earth.

In spiritual matters, of course, we acquire something closer to angelic vision through the life of grace, because by grace we learn to see things as they are—to know as God knows. Happily for angels and humans, both can exceed their natural powers, in accordance with their specific natures, through participation in Divine grace—if only they do not resist it—not only to know as God knows but to will as God wills, and so to love as God loves.

### **Are you hiding from Me today?**

The only thing we can say for sure about these two paths to union with God is that, through a wisdom at least marginally deeper than our own even on our good days, our loving Father has put into place the best possible system for the angelic nature as well as the best possible system for our human nature. That the systems are not identical is a function of our respective natures, for the love with which they are fashioned is the same—a perfect Love which desires to bring every intellectual creature, purely for its own good and its own glory, into free union with Itself.

For my own part, at least on days like today (when I imagine for a few minutes that it would have been more suitable to my exquisite nature to have been made an angel), I take solace that I am at least likely to have a few more moments in time to get things right. I rather suspect that each of us, no matter how highly developed our spiritual sensibilities, is a combination of genuine insight and peculiar self-deception, and that we ought to pray very hard for more opportunities of exactly the kind the angels were not given.

I confess I should not like to meet the One Chesterton called “the man who was Thursday” when I am so confused about the names of my days. As in that marvelous book, when we try to teach Our Lord how to arrange things better, His answer is always the same: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mk 10:38)

Do we grasp in our depths what it means that He has died for us—that He has died for *me*? No, not really; no, not yet. So by all means, Lord, grant us at least a few more generous days. I would like to get things, if not quite perfectly right, at least as close to right as the gifts You have given me permit me to do. And as I seek this without the least presumption, so must I pray without the least judgment, that all Your beloved fools will receive more—and more—and more—precious opportunities to do the same.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1571>

## The road to Hell is paved with Catholic ideals.

It is becoming increasingly common (again!) for bishops and theologians to refer to the moral law as an “ideal”. This is simply more evidence of the secularization of what passes for Christian thought. For example, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago has used this language in [commenting on those who enter into gay marriages](#):

It’s a lot easier to tell people what they are doing in black and white. The important thing in all of this as we move forward is to recognize that people’s lives are very complicated. There are mitigating circumstances, psychological, their own personal history, maybe even biological. It’s not a matter of detracting from what the ideal is.

Never mind that it actually takes moral courage to tell people what they are doing wrong rather than to appear to tolerate it. This should be self-evident, but the quotation also goes a long way toward explaining why Cardinal Cupich has not adopted the policy of another bishop in Illinois, Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, ruling that those in same-sex marriages should not receive Communion or ecclesiastical funeral rites.

In a similar instance, Cupich, who had told the *National Catholic Register* that his role as a pastor “is to help them to discern what the will of God is by looking at the objective moral teaching of the Church”, went on to mute the obvious effect of that statement by adding that he would lead homosexual couples “through a period of discernment, to understand what God is calling them to *at that point*” (emphasis added).

But what God is calling them to do (as we know from the natural law and the objective moral teachings of His Church) is to abandon their false marriages and avoid homosexual relations of any kind—not “at that point” but always and universally.

### The falsity of gradualism

Such confusing statements are fairly obviously designed to comply with a modern myth pertaining to faith and morals, the myth of *gradualism*. Gradualism always presents the moral law as an ideal toward which we are to strive. It allows for the relative goodness of falling short of the ideal, mainly so the Church can accommodate herself to the values of the world. In other words, Catholics who subscribe to this myth can say that violations of God’s law are simply “less good” than adherence to it. It is, after all, harder for the world

to dismiss a useful Catholic leader or teacher who simply maintains that Catholic morals are “best” or “ideal” but that violations of them are okay too.

But this language is very dangerous. Pope St. John Paul II had already put the spotlight on the problem in 1981 in his Apostolic Exhortation on the family *Familiaris Consortio*. He did so in the context of marital love, openness to life, and contraception (for pressure to baptize homosexuality was still quite muted four decades ago). The passage, with emphasis added to assist the reader, is worth quoting in full:

Married people too are called upon to progress unceasingly in their moral life, with the support of a sincere and active desire to gain ever better knowledge of the values enshrined in and fostered by the law of God. They must also be supported by an upright and generous willingness to embody these values in their concrete decisions. They cannot however look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy.

*“And so what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law,’ as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations. In God’s plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God’s command with serene confidence in God’s grace and in his or her own will.”<sup>95</sup>*

On the same lines, it is part of the Church’s pedagogy that husbands and wives should first of all recognize clearly the teaching of *Humanae vitae* as indicating the norm for the exercise of their sexuality, and that they should endeavor to establish the conditions necessary for observing that norm. [no. 34]

## **Good and better, good and bad**

Gradual moral and spiritual development is something we all experience, and to which we are all called. As we progress in self-understanding, in understanding God’s law as a law of love, in our reception of and openness to grace, we see more clearly our own weaknesses and shortcomings in comparison with the perfection of our Father and our merciful Lord. And so we grow in understanding of the good, and strive to encompass more of the good in our own being, as reflected in our own thoughts, words and deeds.

But the one thing which stops this process is setting our own understanding against

the moral laws which God has revealed to us through both nature and Revelation, as infallibly articulated by the Church He established. When we recognize a conflict between our own understanding and the given moral law (often but not always involving our own attraction to something evil), there are two things that we may not conclude. The first is fairly straightforward: We must not conclude that we are right and the natural law, Divine Revelation, and the Church are wrong.

The second is more subtle: We must not say that the thing we value, though contrary to God's law, is *good* but not the *highest good*; or that the thing we value (though contrary to God's law) is *morally acceptable* but not *ideal*. That distinction might exist in the decision to donate \$20 rather than \$200 to CatholicCulture.org (depending on your means)! But in the cases we are considering, what we are clinging to is actually *bad* or *evil* because it represents a privation of the good. For example, when we "beat somebody up", it may be good that we did not commit some greater evil (such as murder). But while it is good to avoid any particular evil, it is not good to commit some other evil. It is not morally good to physically damage or injure another person deliberately.

In the same way, it may be good to avoid engaging in sexual acts with different people every night in a variety of gay bars. But that does not make it good to enter into a more permanent gay sexual relationship with one particular person, or to call that relationship *marriage*. There may be other good things which happen in consequence of this relationship, and even other positive values that are sought within it. Perhaps the two persons involved combine their incomes and give more generously to the poor. Perhaps they share a genuine appreciation for Gregorian Chant. No human person is all bad, or all good. But the homosexual relationship in itself is categorically evil.

This relationship may even prove in the end to be, for particular persons, an experience through which God in His mercy acts to help the participants to recognize that it is wrong. In his surpassing love, He always tries to bring good out of evil if we will but permit Him to do so. But God does not consider this relationship good, and neither may we.

## Repent and believe

It is precisely these critical moral judgments that are swept away when we refer to Christian moral teaching as an "ideal". We can commit ourselves more or less generously to lesser and greater degrees of perfection. But neither Christ nor the Church has called us to "an ideal". Here, rather, is what Our Lord has called us to, as succinctly summarized by the evangelist Mark:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” [Mk 1:14-15]

Moreover, in three different places, Our Lord emphasizes the importance of avoiding sin in very graphic terms:

If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. [Mt 5:30; cf. Mk 9:43; Mk 9:45]

Now we humans do not have angelic natures. Neither our intellects nor our wills operate with perfect freedom. Various impediments limit their effectiveness, some of which may even be severe enough to absolve us from moral responsibility. But most often they simply make moral progress somewhat more difficult. The spiritual life proceeds by stages as we progressively habituate ourselves to Divine grace so that we see with greater clarity and act with greater constancy in confronting the difference between good and evil. God seldom judges us based on a single decision in a single moment of reflection, as He did the angels. He recognizes our weakness, understands our falls, and gives us even more grace to overcome them and make further progress: “Where sin abounds, grace abounds the more” (Rm 5:20).

But the condition for beginning the entire Christian program is to repent and believe the Gospel.

## Conclusion

Finally, there is this: Those who continually refer to Catholic sexual morality as an ideal, with a great tendency to welcome those who refuse to accept that morality on an equal footing in the Church, typically share another interesting habit. They fasten onto popular moral causes as defined by the larger secular culture (environmental or social programs, for example), and flatly condemn those in Hillary Clinton’s infamous basket of deplorables who disagree with their preferred policies on prudential grounds.

I have written before of this tendency to relativize the absolute and to absolutize the relative (most recently in [The priorities of Catholic leadership today, and how they must influence praise and blame](#)). What is this phenomenon but another form of secularization, when Catholic leaders and teachers allow for the rejection of what Christ has taught while insisting on the acceptance of so many popular causes about which Our

Lord had absolutely nothing to say!

Such false prophets seem incapable of stating the obvious. If we are in denial about what natural law, Divine Revelation, and the Church tell us is sinful, we cannot make spiritual progress. And if we attempt to define such evils as legitimate lesser goods within the Church herself, then the Church cannot help us to make spiritual progress either.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=755>

## When politics is not local, the antidote is natural law.

Many experienced political campaigners stress that all politics is local. This is a useful axiom when both the freedom and the ability to engage politically are relatively widespread. In these situations, the building blocks of political victory are local building blocks, so much so that a pressing local concern that affects people's daily lives will, at that level, trump other issues. Bob Marshall, author of *Reclaiming the Republic* (see my [review](#) and Thomas V. Mirus' [Podcast interview](#)), was famous for dealing with Northern Virginians' concern about traffic so that those who were not adamantly anti-life would still vote for him. But important as this insight is, we can see that it tends to define local politics as *elections*, the winning of which enables one to pursue goals which may not be locally supported.

In the United States and Europe—much to the chagrin of those who fear a triumph of popular opinion over ideology—this axiom also has repercussions in national debates on topics ranging from immigration to free trade. Fortunately, there are still elections to be won, but there is already a growing fear among our elites that political liberty has not yet been sufficiently reduced for society to be safe from ordinary folks who no longer take their cues from their “betters”. The truth is that politics is always local not in its origin and exercise but in its impact, though that impact may never be perceived as a political result.

It is a peculiarity of ostensibly democratic societies that unlocal politics must be framed in ideological terms. (In non-democratic societies, such politics would be a simpler exercise in raw power.) Thus it appears that many elections at the national level are fought over ideas which have little impact on our daily lives. Frequently the issues are either so broad or so distant that few can form a reasonable judgment about the impact of one policy or another on the common good. Moreover, as discussions of human problems become more global, all of us understand their particulars less well, and we understand their solutions almost not at all. In such cases a grasp of particular pragmatic outcomes is insufficient. We also need a larger framework of values which determines whether complex issues are likely to be addressed consistently in either good or bad ways.

To take but one example, most citizens of Western nations do not see the tight

connections among such things as human migration, business growth, trade policy, market dynamics, advertising, standard of living, pornography, contraception, broken homes, divorce, abortion, homosexuality and gender theory. They have no coherent vision which particularizes such abstractions. Even if they did, of course, the penny might not drop unless they were actually to see themselves as part of a local community rather than of a transcendent socio-economic class.

### **Universal Politics**

But it is precisely this particularization—this recognition of real impacts on real people whom we know as members of a real community—that enables politics to be understood as *local*. This is in stark contrast to an essentially ideological political culture, which will always generate a regulatory system allowing less and less freedom for self-determination on the local level. The result is a culture in which everything is not *local* but merely *political*.

Bureaucracies flourish in densely-populated, highly complex societies which are largely removed from what we might call the more spacious ownership, use and attachment to land. Urban cultures require a significant level of regulation by sheer dint of numerical proximities. When the dominant world culture is largely an interconnection among empowered urban elites, our grasp of human problems and their causes becomes as difficult as our reconnection with our putative roots in particular regions, villages, families, and the various forms of work which contribute to a common good shared by people we know.

In such genuinely local communities the network of functional values is perhaps more easily perceived and traced, but these communities are virtually non-existent today. Therefore, as our way of life floats higher and farther from truly local realities, real and functioning values become more important, not less, for the simple reason that we find it more difficult to discern the impact of politics on particular lives. We live in a statistical age—which, I urge everyone to recall, is the next step down from an age of “damn lies”. Statistics fail to communicate either personal knowledge or the values which define “personal”.

And so it is precisely the absence of real, tested, working values which plagues our society, ensuring that we will never escape from the regulatory bureaucracies which guide us toward ideological destinations defined by politics—a politics increasingly incomprehensible for the simple reason that it is in its deepest reality not local at all.

### **Quintessentially Local Law**

It is just here that we must recognize what many would call a paradox but which is better called reality itself. For the solution to all of this lies in the natural law, which is the only tie that binds universally precisely because—unlike politics—it is always and everywhere supremely local. Divorced from real communities, politics tends to be the handmaiden of ideology, which is nothing but the false universalization of ideas which lack particular substance. But just as politics can so easily become non-local, the natural law is always, everywhere and necessarily local. When world issues are obfuscated by sheer size and distance, if the political parsing is to be done well, it must be done within the structure of values imposed by the natural law.

Despite the sweep of its formal articulation, what we call the “natural law” is nothing but the structure of values intrinsic to being itself, and so to our participation in being. It is universal not because it is thrust upon us from outside like political ideology or class snobbery but because it inheres particularly in each and every individual thing that is. Thus natural law is never optional—except of course in terms of the question raised by Hamlet about the verb *to be*. To choose not to be “governed” by natural law, is to choose, whether by slow degrees or all at once, not to be.

Even if all politics is in some attenuated sense local, politics is only sometimes perceived as local, and even less often is it controlled locally. Today, in fact, the ideology of politics would insist that it is universal by virtue of being everywhere imposed. But it is the natural law that is truly universal, as we have seen, for the simple reason that each and every “thing” in the universe participates locally in being. This is why the natural law—which is intellectually apprehended abstractly as a system of values derived from being—is the necessary antidote to distant and incomprehensible politics. And it is precisely through holding politicians to the natural law that we dramatically increase our chances of good governance even when we cannot adequately understand the increasingly convoluted chains of cause and effect.

The best way to recover this social glue is through a muscular Christianity which understands itself as both the antithesis and the defeat of ideology. The logical framework of Christian morality is found in the natural law as rationally perceived in the created order, now authoritatively delineated through Revelation, and immeasurably enhanced, in both its apprehension and its observance, by Divine grace. But the natural law is not the product of Christianity; both Divine Revelation and the natural law are rooted in the very identity of God, in whose being all things participate. Judaism’s Ten Commandments are a concise summary of the natural law, for example, and the philosophy of natural law was highly developed—albeit with many social limitations—even in pagan Greece and Rome. Indeed, every person and culture takes at

least some aspects of the natural law for granted because it is in their very bones. Take social notions of *fairness* for example. But cultural patterns obscure other aspects, and personal temptation subverts still others.

Finally, through the recognition of being in which the natural law inheres, those who adhere to the natural law will be far more prone to make politics local again, to judge policy by its impact on real people in real communities, who participate in the gift of being, and for whom the common good depends on a free and open participation in that gift. Politics today has increasingly become specifically unlocal. The art of the possible has become an impossible imposition of cosmic pretensions. Better to return politics to an inherently local system of control. Without the natural law, politics has become a cosmic horror. If we restore a sense of natural law, it should never be worse than a practical joke.

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## The problem with “human dignity” as a moral argument

Pope Francis’ revision to the Catechism on the death penalty says, among other things, that “there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the human person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes” and that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”. Earlier, Pope John Paul’s initial revision to the Catechism had said that public authority should limit itself to “bloodless means”, if they are sufficient to protect human safety, “because they better correspond to the concrete conditions of the common good and are more in conformity to the dignity of the human person.”

I will not attempt to explain Pope Francis’ peculiar use of the term “inviolability” in this context, but the term “dignity” appears multiple times. It is clearly important to the formulation in the Catechism, and it is a trademark of moral discussions around the world today. So it is this term, “human dignity”, which I wish to consider in greater detail.

Here is the context: There is an ongoing argument over whether the change made by Pope Francis, declaring the death penalty to be “inadmissible”, represents a prudential judgment or a change in Church doctrine. Writing for CatholicCulture.org, Phil Lawler and I have argued that it must be prudential, not only because it is the only understanding which fits with prior magisterial teaching, but for two other reasons: (1) The textual arguments for it are generally prudential; and (2) The word “inadmissible” seems deliberately chosen to avoid a non-prudential term such as “immoral”. Thus we might consider a particular proposal “inadmissible” under some circumstances without declaring it to be always and everywhere “immoral”.

However, other commentators have argued that the references to “human dignity” make it clear that this teaching is based on a universal moral truth. This is a profound misunderstanding, and it is precisely the error I wish to correct here, for two main reasons.

### Meaning of “Human Dignity”

The first reason is that the term “human dignity” must be overloaded to be a concrete guide to moral behavior. “Human dignity” is simply shorthand for a recognition of

“human nature” as something different from other created natures, which therefore demands its own assessment and response. To speak about “human dignity” is to say, in effect, “Now look here. We are dealing with a human being, a human person. Therefore, we must understand what this means, and take care.” But a great deal more is needed before we can determine the precise sort of care we must take. And that “more” comes to us through a careful parsing of the natural law into particular moral principles (or the parsing of Divine Revelation, since both come from the same source).

When it comes to “human dignity”, we must draw a clear connection between the “is” and the “ought”. Sadly, even in the context of many moral discussions, the term “human dignity” is too often assumed to imply something that has not been precisely delineated or proved. It is not enough to say that human dignity demands, as a matter of strict morality, treatment X or Y. That statement simply assumes the term “human dignity” includes “the right to treatment in accord with X or Y”, which is a tautology. No, for a strictly moral argument, the applicable principles must be specifically stated, connected and argued.

The second reason follows from the first. Without such carefully adumbrated principles, we cannot speak with any assurance about what “human dignity” means morally. What we find, in fact, is that conceptions of what violates human dignity not only vary widely from culture to culture but also very frequently depend, in the evaluation of particular actions, quite strictly on the end in view.

As an example of variation we might take something simple, like eye contact. In Western cultures, avoiding eye contact when speaking with someone is considered rude or demeaning to their dignity; in Asian cultures, it is considered a reverence, an acknowledgement of the other person’s dignity. Examples of dependence on the “end in view” are easily drawn from what we call “training”. Most of us would regard it as out of keeping with human dignity to order a person out of a room because he or she made a small disturbance. But when it comes to teaching children how to behave in society, we would consider it very much in keeping with their true dignity to do so.

### **Slippery Terminology**

In contemporary Western culture, our elites seem to be on a mission to invest the term “human dignity” with whatever moral content best suits their purposes. We see this in the ever-escalating notions of the “rights” even of children to be able to develop into whatever they wish. But is it really in accordance with human dignity to affirm someone in doing evil (such as in sexual misbehavior of any kind), or is an act of correction more in keeping with that dignity? Or again, one can certainly argue that locking a person in a

room or a cell is contrary to human dignity, and so it would be if it were merely whimsical. But when a punishment is calculated to teach someone to recognize his or her true dignity, and act accordingly, then a restriction may well be more consistent with human dignity than a permission.

The point is this: When we use the term “human dignity” properly, what we are really doing is calling attention to the special character of human nature. At its most fundamental level that character involves intellect and will, understanding and culpability. But there is a danger of using the term “human dignity” in ways that mask or undermine our human responsibility as moral actors. When that happens, the phrase becomes a slogan. We can easily slip into speaking not of the dignity of the human person but of our own agendas, driven by our own passions.

I am not going to argue that execution of criminals is nothing but a punishment calculated to increase human dignity in the accused. Considering this is about human persons discussing the fate of other human persons, it ought to be clear even to the most attenuated moral sense that the decision to take a life must scale a mountain of presumptions to the contrary. But it should be possible to recognize even here an enforcement of human dignity, when it becomes necessary to prevent its violation in the otherwise ungoverned interaction between perpetrators and victims. Considerations of human dignity weigh on *all* sides of the problem, and it is exactly this contextual ambivalence that leads me to argue again that the Catechism’s emphasis on avoiding capital punishment must be understood prudentially. There are, after all, prudential reasons given, and they do have weight.

The fostering and protection of “human dignity” does require not only prudential but universally moral decisions. But the term “human dignity” is not in itself a moral proposition. In the absence of precise moral reasoning, adverting to “human dignity” offers no moral code at all. It is the relationship of ontology with ethics—the reasoned connection between *is* and *ought*—that informs our understanding of authentic human dignity. If that connection is not made, we are reduced to either idealism or pragmatism, and we have no moral guidance at all.

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## Revelation: Minimal authority, lived in suffering

It could have been done differently, of course. God could have presented a continuous interior Revelation to each and every one of us, so that we all could enjoy a perfect uninterrupted awareness of His Being and His Divine will. But that would have made an even worse mess than we are in now. For this approach would not have guaranteed our acceptance and obedience unless God also eliminated our freedom. He would have had to imprint Truth without any assent on our souls, which would then (again, without assent) control all our thoughts, words and actions.

Hopefully the point is obvious: The most important human reality when it comes to Divine Revelation is the gift of free will. Free will renders impossible any sort of immediate, univocal affirmation of the true and the good.

But this does not mean God eschews interior illumination altogether. On the contrary, He uses it almost continuously to communicate Himself and His will to us, but without subverting our freedom. He does this in two ways: First, by what we call the natural law, which is known to the human conscience through human nature's personal participation in being; and, second, by the direct promptings of the Holy Spirit, Who seeks in a great many mysterious ways to guide us into all truth. (For Scripture on this point, see passages such as 1 Tim 2:4; the dangers expressed in 2 Tim 3; and of course Jn 14:15-17,25-26.)

Two specific occurrences have prompted my thoughts. On the one hand, I have been exchanging emails with someone who registered on CatholicCulture.org for the purpose of challenging our Catholic beliefs, demanding to know how we square this or that belief or practice with various passages he has cherry-picked from Scripture. On the other hand, Sophia Institute Press just sent me a copy of their new book by Rod Bennett, provocatively entitled *Bad Shepherds*, which is a study of some of the worst bishops and popes in history. Bennett's purpose, paradoxically, is to reassure us that all is not lost in these latter days. The compelling subtitle is "The Dark Years in Which the Faithful Thrived While Bishops Did the Devil's Work". But my correspondent, surely, would use this book for the opposite purpose, to lead Catholics to despair of the Church.

If we take free will as a given—and we must, for God's whole point is to draw us into His love, and there is no love without freedom—then something very important is

true that Rod Bennett knows and my correspondent does not: Not only human persons but *all* persons—including angels and even the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—find themselves on the horns of a dilemma when it comes to eliciting a properly-ordered human love. Reflection on this reality will make many things far more clear to us. Among them, I emphasize primarily this: God’s ultimate purpose in permitting human suffering is for us to learn to love with God’s own love, imparted as a share in His own life, rather than to depend solely on our own meager and unstable powers of affection.

This is a profound mystery, about which books can be written. Fortunately, today I have more practical points in mind. What, after all, would we have God do? What plan for our salvation would be consistent with the exalted nature He has given us?

### **Our thick heads**

We can see immediately that finite beings possessed of intellect and will must know God through a Revelation, for the mysteries of God are beyond our ability to reason out, even in a perfect world, based solely on what we can know through nature. Still, our very nature does convince us that there is a fundamental difference between good and evil, and that we somehow live under a judgement. Therefore, there must be a Judge who cares how we live. As Newman argued so persuasively, there can be nothing more likely than that He who cares how we live would disclose His will more clearly. For this reason, all men and women of good sense are ever on the lookout for a Revelation. But if we really are reasonable, we will accept no claim that is not accompanied by signs that could only come through Divine power.

As we have seen, though, our freedom places severe restrictions on such signs, for they must not be such as to continuously dominate our wills. What could be more useful, therefore, than the startling claim of resurrection from the dead? Such a claim is specific to a time and place in history yet unique to our entire history. To become convinced of the truth of such a claim is to know where to look for our Revelation.

But again, this Revelation cannot be such as to compromise our freedom. Perhaps we can recognize, then, that Revelation is most useful for its purpose if it is expressed by fits and starts, as it were, in the midst of human history, sometimes a whisper and sometimes a thunderclap, in events which point to something greater than we directly perceive. Thus we have Jonah and Solomon, but there is something greater than even Jonah and Solomon in the crowning Resurrection of Jesus (Mt 12:39-42). Yet even the Resurrection, like all moments of Revelation, comes and goes in history.

How then are we to reflect back or even forward upon this Revelation year by year without constant error and confusion? Some would point to the written word in

Scripture, but how do we know Scripture is the Word of God? And if any writings are the Word of God, how do we know which ones? Further, how do we know about all the things the Risen One taught that were not written down (Jn 21:25)? How do we know that we understand what is written? How do we know, as we reflect on Scripture over the centuries, that our understanding of its depth and richness is growing rather than diminishing? Whom in this confused world do we dare trust as a guide?

### **Authority Principle**

Even these questions must find a solution consistent with both human reason and human freedom. If a definitive Revelation is made and identified and recorded, then there must be established along with it what we call a “principle of authority”, that is, a defined and identifiable ongoing authority, included in the Revelation itself, which can distinguish truth from error in all that has been revealed.

To be consistent with our necessary liberty, this authority must be in a very real sense minimalistic. It must create only a guaranteed authentic baseline which enables us actually to grow in freedom and love through the quintessential human acts of knowing and living the Truth. Any alleged revelation which lacks such an ongoing principle of authority for its own interpretation—which lacks a definitive provision for settling disputes over its own meaning—can only become increasingly chaotic and useless over time. Even within the Christian line of thought, the division between Catholics and Protestants makes this painfully clear.

Now, as it happens, only Catholicism, of all the religions in the world, claims a definitive principle of authority. The Revelation which gave birth to Catholicism identifies this principle in Peter and his successors, who must “confirm the brethren” (Lk 22:32). It is a principle not only recorded in the written Revelation but carried forward in the ongoing life of the very community established by the One Who Rose. But notice another necessary consistency, for this authority, going down through the ages, cannot be manifested in such a way that the Christian community always receives demonstrably perfect guidance in all things, or that those who bear that authority manifest undeniable personal signs of Divinity which overpower all human doubt. For that too would be inconsistent with human freedom, which was given for love.

No, it is sufficient that the revealed authority protect, preserve and transmit the authentic Revelation so that each person down through the ages can respond to it anew. Therefore, it is precisely the establishment and endurance of this authority, in all its weakness and all its necessity, which makes nonsense of the constant objections of my correspondent while making perfect sense out of Rod Bennett’s new book. For my

correspondent cannot on his own be certain of his understanding of the original Revelation. He cannot set his own non-existent personal authority against the authority established by Christ. And at the same time, it is this very authority which makes it possible to read a book like *Bad Shepherds* with the discernment necessary to receive as a sign of hope what might otherwise betoken only despair.

## Conclusion

Catholics are not “people of the Book”. We are the living Body of Christ, growing forward through history until the consummation of all things. Despite our sins and our blindness, despite our confusion and our betrayals, we have what we need from God Himself. But what we have is conditioned by the inextricable link between freedom and love. This means that here and now we look forward to our union with the Risen One only while we also carry the Cross. As St. Paul explained, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).

Again, what would we expect God to do? My argument is hardly new! As for the authority principle which has been incorporated into the one true Revelation, the very first person who exercised that authority tried very hard to make us understand. Here and now we are guaranteed only the minimum consistent with the task of human liberty to choose Love. “Rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings,” urged St. Peter, “that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet 4:13).

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## The Orchestra Analogy: One Divine symphony, no restarts

That great twentieth-century evangelist, Bishop Fulton Sheen, had a brilliant ability to come up with examples and analogies to make Catholic teaching easier to understand. One example is the analogy of the orchestra that he used to explain Original Sin. We all understand that the sins of Adam and Eve were the first sins and that somehow Adam's sin was decisive in the Divine plan. But we find it more difficult to make sense of "Original Sin" as a disruptive force within our very nature as human persons.

On several occasions, Sheen explained Original Sin as a kind of ongoing process. To do so, he compared it to a musician in an orchestra who rebelled against the symphony and its conductor by playing a wrong note. This first flaw was both intriguing and infectious, opening up and encouraging possibilities for the other musicians—the possibility of becoming, in effect, a soloist, of exercising musical freedom in disruptive ways, of trying to improve upon the original score, or of doing something new and different of "my own": In short, all the foolish possibilities which flatter our pride or encourage our weaknesses.

Continuing the analogy, Sheen suggested that the only solution was for the original composer to invite musicians to join a new orchestra and perform a new symphony—the symphony of our redemption by the Divine composer, conducted by Jesus Christ.

There is something to be said for this analogy. The harmonic ambience of human life is unalterably changed for everybody as sin irretrievably works its way through space and time, unceasing in its discordant effects. With all we now know (or think we know) about human psychology, we are certainly aware of how much damage can be done in children by the sins and shortcomings of their parents, or in spouses by the sins of their mates. The same is true for employers and employees, teachers and students, among friends, and even in our neglect (whether deliberate or not) of those everywhere who need our help.

Nowadays, of course, we are more prone to blame the sins of others that have somehow warped us (as they often do), without recognizing the disorder in our own being which is not actually generated but merely exacerbated by the negative influence of others—and which too easily reaches the boiling point. But the introduction of the "false note" into the "symphony" is still a fine analogy, as long as we recognize (as

Sheen himself stated) that it is a fine analogy only up to the point at which it breaks down.

### **The art of breaking analogies**

One of the delights of those of us who cannot think up a good analogy to save our lives is to demonstrate the shortcomings of the analogies offered by more creative souls. Call it another effect of Original Sin if you will, but I believe that even Bishop Sheen would agree that the most important way in which his analogy falls short is in the idea that God is forced by the false note to compose a new symphony and create a new orchestra to put things right.

Never mind for the moment that the broken symphony continues to be played even while the new orchestra is being formed, or that first we received Opus 2 in Noah Major, then Opus 3 in the Key of Abraham, followed by Opus 4 in the Manner of David, not to mention a great deal of truly prophetic conducting, only for everything to unravel multiple times before God decides to dispense with hirelings and conduct the orchestra Himself lest Time should run out! No, I do not believe many would try to use the symphony analogy as a complete illustration of salvation history.

Instead, the biggest problem with the analogy is the one found in nearly all discussions of Original Sin, namely the bizarre notion that God was forced to change His mind and write a new symphony—that God was forced to *make a new plan*. If we are to understand the least thing about Original Sin, we must begin by stating categorically that it did not force God back to his manuscript paper to pen a new score. It is not only that God does not change His mind. It is also that God does not need to do so.

Unfortunately, the traditional grade-school discussion of Original Sin in Catholic education (when it is taught at all) tends to introduce two very significant doubts. The first doubt is typically centered on ourselves: It does not seem “fair” that we do not get to start off with the same advantages as our First Parents. In fact, the orchestra analogy is designed in large part to eliminate this doubt, by suggesting that once sin starts, the consequent disruption within the whole human race is inescapable. For things to be otherwise, God would have had to do more than prune humanity; he would have had to wipe it out altogether and start again. And even when we contemplate this scenario, we must surely realize that sin, given human freedom, would have begun again as well.

But the second doubt is squarely centered on God. I believe this is an insurmountable doubt in one very important sense. For it is impossible to grasp Who God Is if we grow up convinced that He makes faulty plans which must be altered when they break down. This doubt renders Divine Providence unintelligible. It is the clincher that proves we have pressed the orchestra analogy as far as it will go, because we have pressed it to the

point of misleading us when it comes to God. The sacrifice of Christ is not a hastily contrived Plan B deployed to recover from an ill-conceived Plan A.

### God's one and only Plan

Happily, recognizing the breaking point of this analogy may be the most important thing we can do with it. What we must realize in reflecting on the story of Creation and Original Sin is that God knew from all eternity exactly how His *entire* plan, in all its original integrity, would unfold and work itself out through Redemption in Jesus Christ. God knew from all eternity that the best possible plan—the plan which would give each and every human person the best opportunity to enter into God's eternal embrace—was a plan which honors our freedom, permits us to sin and therefore to suffer, encourages us to repent, and enables us through grace to seek Him with our whole hearts.

All of this is motivated by God's deepest desire that all men should be saved and brought to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). God is love, and from the first, Love understood that the best possible nature for human persons, and the best possible plan for them to join Him in an eternity of love, was a nature and a plan that permitted them to sin, to suffer, and to experience Redemption. It is utterly incongruous to conceive of the story of the Fall as an occasion for God to change His mind. From our human perspective, we might marvel at His predictive accuracy in making His plans, but in reality, since God is outside of time, all things are present to Him in a single glance, which is the glance of Love.

This does not mean the Divine symphony has only one movement. It simply means that there is no need for God to scrap any movement and write another one based on “actual historical results”. God loves us. He has loved each of us from all eternity. And He has known from all eternity that it is precisely through the consequences of sin that the greatest number will be saved. Actually, the truth is even deeper than that. God has known from all eternity that it is through sin and its consequences that *each one of us* will have the greatest personal, existential opportunity to be saved.

Our loving Father has never been so shortsighted that He has had to tear up a symphony or scrap a plan. His score was written from the first with notes shaped by personal sins and virtues in order to maximize participation in His love. From the first it has been a score of Redemption. Put another way, God has never failed to conduct His orchestra with the symphony's impact on each one of us personally in mind. Therefore, if we press this modified analogy perhaps we will find ourselves contemplating the music of the spheres—by which I mean the eternal harmony of love.

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