Natural Law

I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts. ~ Jeremiah 31:33

WE ALL FEEL THAT WE KNOW right from wrong, even if we sometimes have difficulty agreeing on which is which. Built into our very being is God's law, a law written on our hearts. This is called the "natural law," that is, the law, discoverable by our own reason, which is part of our very nature. This part of our rational capability is called our conscience, which not only discovers what is right and wrong but also encourages us to do that which is right and avoid that which is wrong (see handout on The Light of Conscience).

The Wellspring of Natural Law

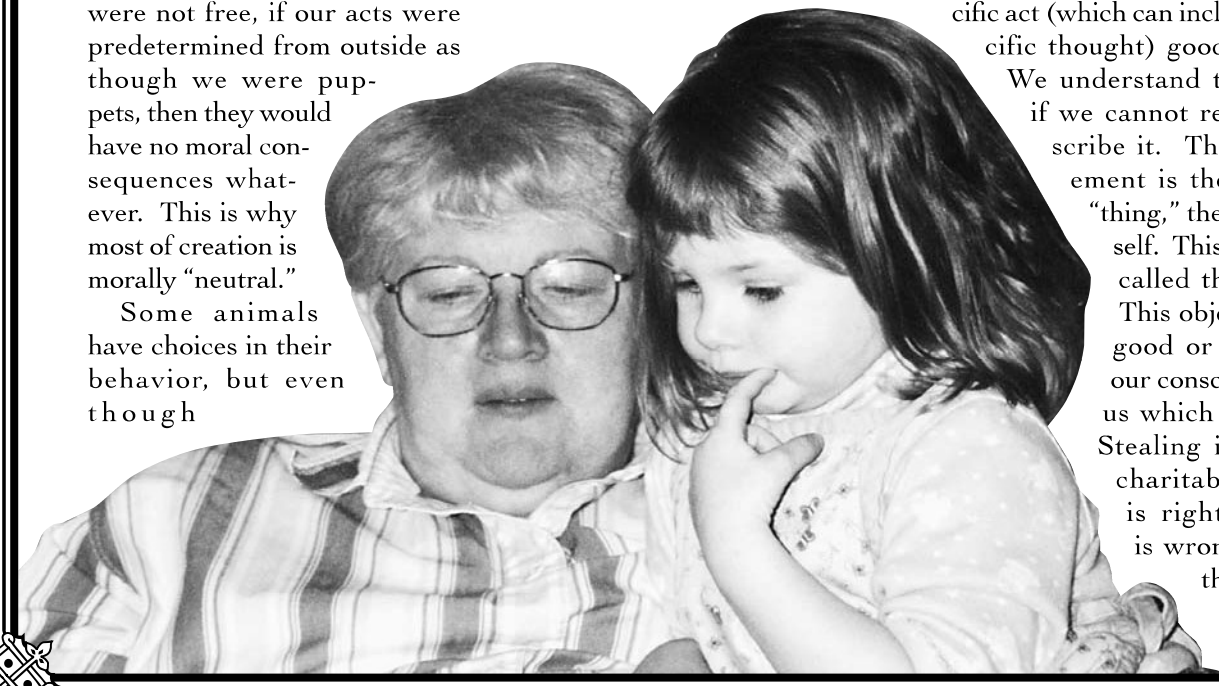
We are all created with a desire for God, who is the source of everything good and the judge of all good. God is the author of all being, and he created us a certain way. The natural law can be thought of as our "operating instructions," built into us the way an operating system is built into a computer. Our "operating instructions" tell us to seek the good and to avoid evil.

However, unlike the computer, we can choose whether or not to follow the operating instructions. It is only possible to actually do good and evil acts because God has given us the freedom to choose. If we were not free, if our acts were predetermined from outside as though we were puppets, then they would have no moral consequences whatever. This is why most of creation is morally "neutral."

Some animals have choices in their behavior, but even though they are free, they are not rational. They cannot understand the rightness or wrongness of their actions. We may have read of animals such as chimpanzees that kill their young on occasion, or of cowbirds that kick a sparrow's eggs out of its nest so that they can lay their own for the sparrow to raise, or of lions that steal the food of a pack of hyenas. None of these actions are either right or wrong, because these animals have no rational conscience to guide them.

Because the natural law is part of who we are as humans, it is universal and imposes common principles on everyone. It is the basis for each person's fundamental rights and duties. It is unchangeable and permanent, unaffected by whatever ideas dominate society, whatever political structure exists, and whatever customs are in force. *It cannot be removed from the human heart.* Only individuals who cannot use their intellect — who cannot reason — are exempted from obeying the natural law, including infants and small children and those whose brains are sufficiently damaged that reasoning is impossible. However, these individuals, because they share our common humanity, have the same rights under the natural law as everyone else.

"Built into our very being is God's law, a law written on our hearts."



The Three Elements of a Moral Act

What goes into making a specific act (which can include a specific thought) good or bad? We understand this, even if we cannot readily describe it. The first element is the specific "thing," the action itself. This "thing" is called the **object**. This object can be good or bad, and our conscience tells us which is which. Stealing is wrong, charitable giving is right. Lying is wrong, telling the truth is

right. Ruining someone's good name is wrong, kindness is right. Murder is wrong, nursing someone to health is right.

The second element is **intention**. Another word for intention is purpose, and yet another is "end." We have all heard that "the end does not justify the means." This means that a good intention cannot make a bad object right. Cheating on a test in school to improve a grade, even if the intention is to someday become a physician and save lives, is still cheating and is still wrong. Furthermore, we can ruin an otherwise good object by having a bad intention. Giving large amounts of money to charity solely so one can boast about one's generosity is not enough to make the gift good. Being kind to an aged parent solely for the inheritance is not enough to make the kindness worth something. Yet we can do a thing with many intentions; we are all familiar with "mixed motives." These do not in themselves make a good act bad, but they can reduce its goodness considerably. One purpose of growing in virtue is to purify our motivations so that we do good for the right reasons: that is, because doing good things is good and pleases God.

The third element is the **circumstances** that affect an act. While circumstances cannot make an evil object good, they contribute to making a good action less or more good, and a bad action less or more evil. An example that everyone can think of is coercion. A man who might never consider robbing a bank might do so if a gun were pointed at his head. A mother who might never consider stealing a car might do so if the vehicle were the only way to quickly transport her desperately sick child to a hospital. A person who might never steal food might do so if the family was starving and they had no money. While all these actions are evil in themselves, the responsibility of the person doing them is far less than that of a person who robs banks for a living, wants to joyride in a stolen car, or steals luxury goods "just for fun."

Ignorance is never considered a circumstance that makes a person less guilty of a sinful act. No one is considered to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in everyone's conscience. Even if a person is capable of, eventually, suppressing his or her conscience, the very acts needed to suppress the conscience — a life of habitual sin — mean that a multitude of serious sins have already been committed. We have an obligation to seek the truth and do the good, and failure to educate and inform our conscience results in a form of culpable — that is, guilty — ignorance that does not reduce the moral evil of an act.

All three — goodness of object, goodness of intention, and goodness of circumstances — are required to make a morally good act. We cannot judge the morality of an act by ignoring its object and paying attention only to intention or circumstances. "One may not do evil so that good may result from it" (CCC 1756). For objects that are bad in themselves, nothing can make them good. Although intention and circumstances might reduce guilt, the act can only be less bad.

"The natural law is the basis for each person's fundamental rights and duties."

The Role of Passions in Moral Acts

Our own feelings and desires — our passions — such as love, hate, sadness, anger, desire, fear, and joy are also, in themselves, morally neutral. They are part of who we are, and without them we could sense, but make nothing of what we experienced; and we could think, but the thoughts would be mechanical. Our passions are what make us more than scientific instru-

ments and more than computers; they are what drive us to an action in regard to something we feel or imagine to be good or bad.

Our feelings and desires rise to the level of morality when they motivate acts, even if the act is only one of the mind or the intention (that is, we can do good and evil acts in our thoughts as well as in what we do). No matter how strong our passions, they are under the control of our reason. Because this is so, we can never claim that we are not responsible for our acts because of some strong emotion, such as hatred or fear (although sometimes our responsibility is diminished). Our emotions and feelings can be led into paths of virtue, or we can allow them to lead us to sin. Our moral perfection involves being moved to the good by our intellect, our will, *and* our passions: *"my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God"* (Ps 84:2), and the Holy Spirit moves all of these by grace toward the good.

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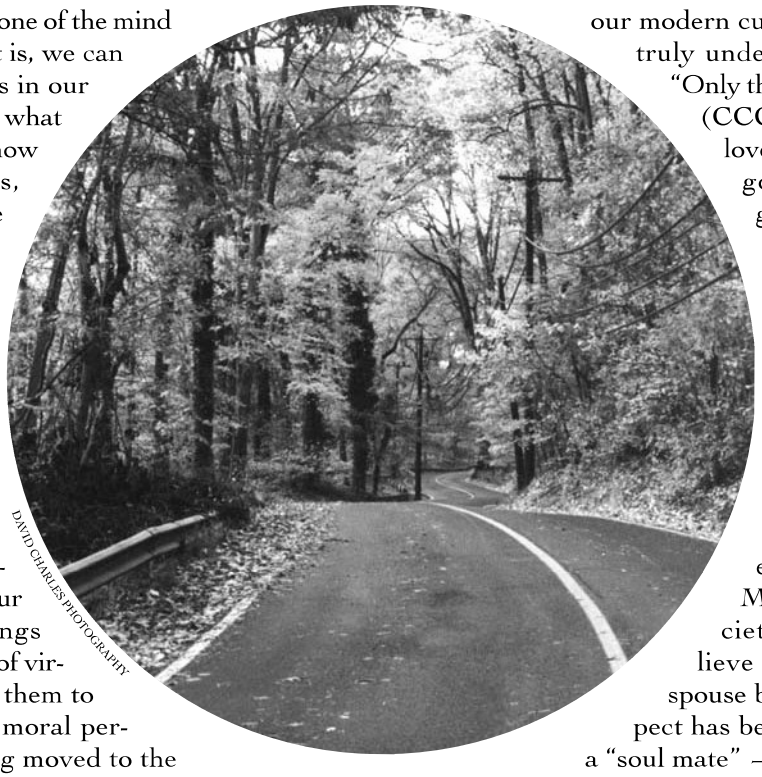


Strong passion is one of the circumstances that can affect the degree of sinfulness of an act. We all have head of crimes committed "in the heat of anger," and we all know that these crimes can be less seriously sinful than the same act committed "in cold blood." This is so because becoming overmastered by passion can reduce the freedom of the person doing the act, so it is no longer, in effect, a fully voluntary act. However, a person who makes absolutely no effort to master his or her passions, and perhaps instead feels that it is somehow more "spontaneous" not to do so, is indeed guilty much as a drunk driver is guilty for not ensuring that he or she did not get behind the wheel.

Of all the passions, the most fundamental is love, the strongest passion. Love is aroused by attraction to whatever is thought to be good. "Love causes a desire for the absent good and the hope of obtaining it; this movement finds completion in the pleasure and joy of the good possessed" (CCC 1765). In our modern culture, it is difficult to truly understand what love is. "Only the good can be loved"[1] (CCC 1766). When we love another, we will the good of another, not good for ourselves.

Love is often considered to excuse practically any bad action, on the grounds of a "good intention." Yet if a good intention cannot make a bad action good, then even love cannot undo the evil of a bad action. Many people in our society, for example, believe that divorcing one's spouse because a better prospect has been found — perhaps a "soul mate" — is, if not good, then not bad either, because one has acted out of "love." This kind of love is a disordered passion seeking a bad object. Because it is not seeking the good, but only some selfish, perhaps transient, perception of the good, in reality it is not genuinely love at all, but self-gratification.

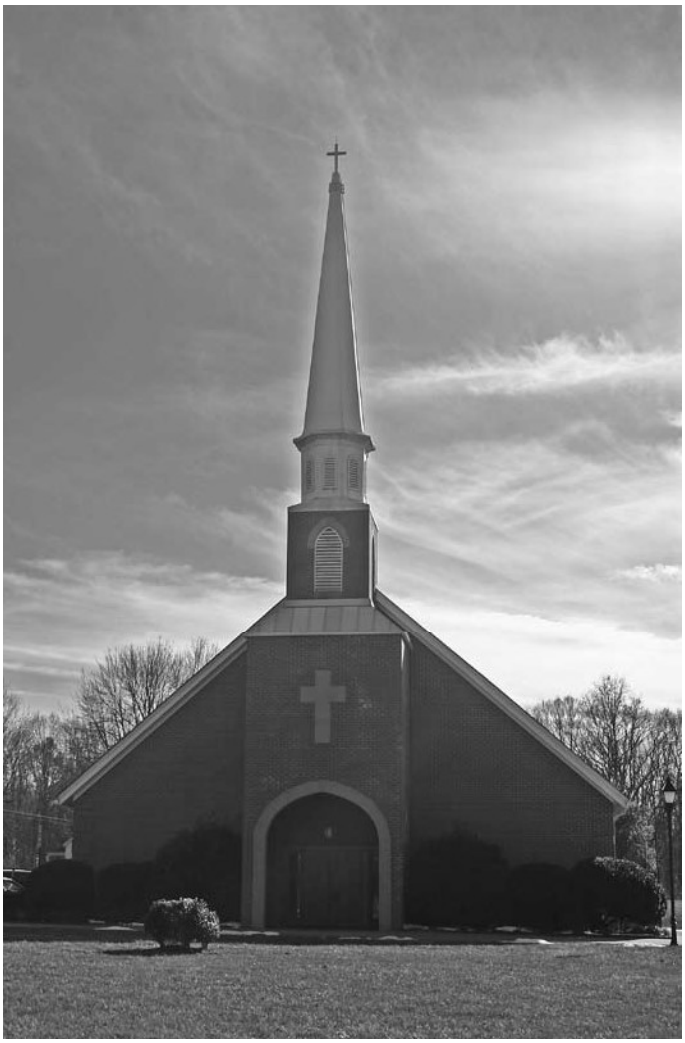
Because our passions are disordered as a result of original sin (see handout on Original Sin), we find it difficult to always do good, even when we want to. We struggle against our passions, as St. Paul did: *"For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members"* (Rom 7:19, 22-23).

Natural Law and the Natural Consequences of Sin

Because the natural law is built into us as our "operating instructions," when we go awry, our life

[1] Cf. St. Augustine, De Trin., 8, 3, 4 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina 42, 949-950 (Paris: 1841-1855)

goes awry. Even the best of intentions cannot for long conceal to the wrongdoer the natural consequences of his or her deeds: *"As you have done, it shall be done to you, your deeds shall return on your own head"* (Ob v 15). Among these consequences are excessive drinking and drug use, depression, anxiety, sadness, and a continued tendency to bad judgment. While each of these things, in themselves, can spring from causes other than sin — and we must not conclude that an individual whose feelings and behaviors are less than ideal is engaging in secret sin — they are very often indications of self-punishment or attempts at self-forgetfulness, however much they might be done without conscious intention. God is not arbitrary and vengeful, but he is just, and he will allow the punishment to take place. If he did not, then no choice that we made, for good or ill, would be worth anything, for it would have no consequences.



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

St. Edward's Parish in Bowie, Maryland, built in 1940

"Even love cannot undo the evil of a bad action."

Sinners may often do wrong because they have persuaded themselves that it is not truly wrong, that they are really seeking good. Abortion is an excellent example of this warped way of thinking. A woman who seeks an abortion because she doesn't want a child (right then, or ever) may somehow believe she is doing a good thing. Over the years, however, her heart, her mind, and her body — where she is "alone with God whose voice echoes in [her] depths"[2] (CCC 1776) — will reveal to her the dreadful evil she has done in ending innocent life.

Furthermore, no sin harms the sinner alone. Murder, lying, and stealing are abhorrent because they destroy the human community and individual members of it. Adultery and fornication are wrong because they violate the rights of the innocent spouse (present or future), destroy marriages, leave behind great residues of sorrow and anger, violate the rights of children and do great damage to them. Innocent children bear the brunt of their parents' sinfulness, and themselves as parents damage their own offspring, generating a cascade of misery that affects all of society.

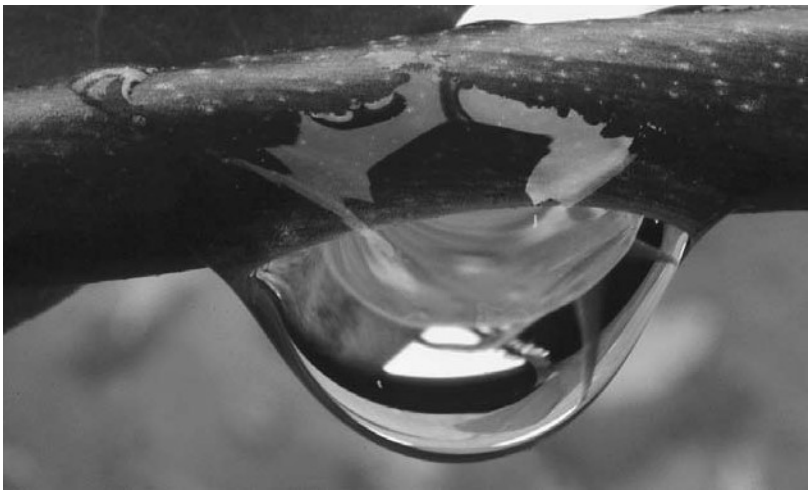
Natural Law and Revealed Law

Yet in today's culture it becomes difficult to clearly understand the precepts of the natural law. There are a multitude of voices claiming authority, including the "everybody" who commits the same wrong that one is tempted to do. Few of us are entirely free of the influence of others, and all of us are around people who not only sin themselves, but also scorn those who don't sin as self-righteous. Under these conditions, the "still, small voice" inside our hearts might be almost impossible to hear. This is the reason for revealed law — the Ten Commandments and their perfection in the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the New Testament (see handout on God's Law).

[2] *Gaudium et Spes,* 16

Natural Law and Civil Law

Modern secular democracies that dominate the developed world, including most English-speaking countries, find themselves increasingly adrift. The moral law is indispensable for building the human community and is a necessary basis for civil law. No one in civil authority — not legislative bodies, not judges or courts, not police officers or political leaders — has the right to "command or establish what is contrary to the dignity of persons and the natural law" (CCC 2235). Moreover, citizens of any nation, democracy or not, are "obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel" (CCC 2242). *"We must obey God rather than men"* (Acts 5:29), St. Peter told officials who forbade him to preach faith in Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Those who engage in civil disobedience, however, must do so only when they do not themselves engage in immoral acts, and only when no other alternative exists.



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The Church as Teacher of the Natural Law

Because observance of the natural law is necessary for salvation, God's great gift of the Church includes its authority to proclaim and teach the natural law as well as revealed law. It proclaims "to men what they truly are and [reminds] them of what they should be before God"[3] (CCC 2036). We are thus always able to avail ourselves of authoritative teachings on areas not specifically addressed in revealed law. For example, many areas of morality regarding marriage, sexuality, and procreation of children have been affected by attitudes and technologies that were unknown to the writers of Sacred Scripture. Using the principles of natural law, the Church gives us authoritative norms for enabling us to determine the morality of a specific act. Thus, for example, the Church condemns the conception of children in any way but through the coming together of a husband and wife in conjugal love. Those who cannot conceive, or cannot fertilize a human ovum, may yearn for a child so strongly that they may not see, or are unwilling to admit, the harm of in-vitro fertilization, sperm donation, and surrogate pregnancy. It is the Church, interpreting the natural law, which teaches us that each child has the *right* to be conceived in the way God intended, within the loving relationship of a marriage. The grief, the deception, the killing of "surplus" embryos, the lawsuits, the recriminations that have surrounded alternative methods of conception are all indications of their moral evil. No amount of happiness brought to even one mother or father who desires a child can turn something intrinsically evil — something that violates a child's dignity and fundamental rights — into something good. In his mercy, God may allow the good of a child to be brought forth from means not in his will. Although a child is never anything but a gift and blessing, this does not make the unnatural means by which the child was conceived anything but intrinsically evil. Many times in our society, the Church stands alone in proclaiming the truths of right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and sin. Founded on the firm rock of God's eternal law, the Church remains steadfast, and *"the powers of death shall not prevail against it"* (Mt 16:18).

(CCC 1749-1756, 1762-1770, 1776, 1860, 1954-1960, 1965, 2036, 2235, 2242)

[3] Cf. *Dignitatis Humanae* 14