

THE NINE COMMANDMENTS:  
THE DECALOGUE AND THE NATURAL LAW

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In his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II attributes to St. Thomas Aquinas the seemingly innocuous statement that, “. . . the [ten] commandments contain the whole natural law.”<sup>1</sup> Both the “Vatican” English Translation and the original Latin text cite the *Summa Theologiæ* I-II, q. 100, article 1. However, the citation is troubling for two reasons: First, St. Thomas appears to have said the opposite; and second, the proposition is misleading at best.

Let us begin with the second point. It is clear that the commandments as revealed in Exodus 20 constitute an incomplete—or at least inchoate—statement of the natural law. The Decalogue, for example, commands honor to parents but not to grandparents or other relatives; it forbids murder but not maiming or other kinds of physical injury, psychological injury or injury to reputation; it forbids adultery but not incest or sodomy or simple fornication; it forbids stealing but not fraud; it forbids perjury but not lying; it prohibits coveting one’s neighbor’s wife but not his daughters. Furthermore, the commandments are largely negative. There are no gen-

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<sup>1</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993), n. 79, p. 101. It is important to note that the author has no quarrel with this magnificent document other than the one ill-advised citation under consideration.

eral commandments to be temperate in food and drink, to be courageous in face of danger, to be just in public and private affairs or to be prudent in all actions. Thus it is difficult to see how the Decalogue contains "the whole natural law."

Some might object that, while some of these points are not explicit in the Ten Commandments, all of them are implicit in one way or another. This objection contains more than a kernel of truth. There is no question that the spirit of the law extends much further than the letter. We would expect the man who avoids his neighbor's wife to leave his neighbor's daughter alone as well. At the same time, however, when Our Lord extends the Old Testament prohibition against murder to anger, he makes it clear that he is *adding* to the commandment rather than making explicit what was implicit before.<sup>2</sup>

The same is true of a second objection. It is certainly possible to say that the Decalogue "contains" the other precepts in the sense that the latter are *reducible* to the former, just as the Decalogue itself is reducible to the principles of the natural law.<sup>3</sup> The difficulty is that one must already have a concept of the natural law independent of the Decalogue and the other precepts in order to grasp the participation of one in the other.

In either case, it is clear that the commandments *as stated in Exodus* are sorely in need of supplementation. And that supplementation, as will be shown more clearly below, can only come from additional revelation or an independent concept of the natural law.<sup>4</sup>

There is another difficulty with attempting to oversimplify the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew* 5:21-2: "You have heard that it was said to them of old: thou shalt not kill. And whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you, that whosoever is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of the judgment." (All Scripture citations are from the Douay-Rheims translation unless otherwise noted.)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 100, art. 3.

<sup>4</sup> This should not be surprising from St. Thomas' point of view since he regards the Old Law in general as "imperfect"; *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 98, art. 1, *corp.*

natural law. Not only are there things in the natural law which are ostensibly not in the Ten Commandments, there is one commandment that is not *per se* part of the natural law: "Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day."<sup>5</sup> First of all, the calendar based on a week of seven days ending with the Sabbath or Saturday was exclusively a Semitic concept unknown among the gentiles. It was based upon the revelation of the six days of creation in *Genesis*. The Roman month, for example, was divided by the kalends, the nones and the ides.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Greeks appeared to believe that the duty of honoring the gods was fixed by nature but the time and manner was somewhat arbitrary.<sup>7</sup>

We are obliged to say that the Third Commandment adds to the natural law precept of giving worship to God the positive prescription of honoring God on the last day of the week.<sup>8</sup> Thus while all ten commandments contain natural law precepts, only nine of them unequivocally reflect duties imposed by the natural law itself. However, the point that St. Thomas is making in the passage cited in *Veritatis Splendor* is not that the commandments contain the natural law but that the natural law contains the commandments.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE ABROGATION OF THE OLD LAW

The Decalogue, of course, is only part of the Old Law which is revealed in *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, and *Deuteronomy*. But if the Old Law has been abrogated, then the entire discussion of

<sup>5</sup> *Exodus* 20:9

<sup>6</sup> Cf. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene II.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, V. 7 (1134b 17-24).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Exodus*, 20:8-11: "Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day. Six days shalt thou labor, and shalt do all thy works. But on the seventh day [Saturday] is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: Thou shalt do no work on it. . . . For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them, and rested on the seventh day [Saturday]: therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it.

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 100, art. 1, *corp.*

whether the Old Law contains the natural law or the natural law contains the Old Law would appear moot.

On the face of it, there is ample evidence that the Old Law was not abrogated. First of all, there are several passages in the Old Testament which strongly suggest the permanence of the Law. One example can be found in *Baruch*:

This is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that is forever.<sup>10</sup>

Again, the justly famous text from the *Gospel of Matthew* is often cited in this context:

Do not think that I have come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For amen I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot, or one tittle shall not pass of the law. . .<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, there are passages in the writings of the Church fathers which appear to corroborate the permanence of the Old Law. While the following text from St. Irenæus deals specifically with the Decalogue, the implication for the whole Law is clear:

The words of the Decalogue remain likewise for us Christians. Far from being abolished, they have received amplification and development from the fact of the coming of the Lord in the flesh.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the pastoral advice given by the Council of Trent to priests and teachers of the Gospel appears to presuppose that the Old Law is still in force:

Since, then, the Decalogue is a summary of the whole Law, the pastor should give his days and nights to its consideration, that he may be able not only to regulate his own life

<sup>10</sup> *Baruch* 4:1.

<sup>11</sup> *Matthew* 5:17-18.

<sup>12</sup> St. Irenæus, *Adv. hæres.*, 4, 16, 3-4: PG 7/1, 1017-1018.

by its precepts, but also to instruct in the law of God the people committed to his care.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, as recent an authority as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* appears to sum up 2,000 years of Church teaching:

Following Jesus Christ involves keeping the commandments. The Law has not been abolished.<sup>14</sup>

Given these and many other passages, it is surprising to find St. Thomas appear to contradict them so flatly:

But the Old Law was set aside (*reprobatur*) when there came the perfection of grace.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that St. Thomas' language in this passage is drawn from the Letter to the Hebrews:

There is indeed a setting aside of the former commandment, because of the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.<sup>16</sup>

It is paradoxical to find such authoritative texts on opposite sides of this issue. However, St. Thomas begins to resolve the paradox by distinguishing the Old Law into three parts, or more precisely, aspects: the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial:

We must therefore distinguish three kinds of precept in the Old Law: viz. *moral* precepts, which are dictated by the natural law; *ceremonial* precepts, which are determinations of divine worship; and *judicial* precepts, which are determinations of justice to be maintained among men.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> John A. McHugh, O.P. and Charles J. Callan, O.P., trans., *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1923), p. 357.

<sup>14</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), n. 2053, p. 498.

<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, Q. 98, art. 2, *corpus*; cf. art. 2, obj. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Hebrews* 7:18; the Jerusalem translation reads, "The earlier commandment is thus abolished."; cf. *Summa Theologiæ* Q. 98, art. 2, *ad* 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, Q. 99, art. 4, *corpus*; cf. Q. 99, art. 2, 3, 5.

## "ABOLISHED BY BEING FULFILLED"

The ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Old Law ceased to exist with the coming of Christ and the establishment of a new moral order. The New Law does not perfect the Old merely by adding to it or by supplementing it but by transforming it. We often refer to baptism as a "spiritual circumcision<sup>18</sup>," not because it adds a spiritual dimension to the circumcision of the flesh, but because it replaces it altogether. The ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Old Law are thus "abolished by being fulfilled."<sup>19</sup>

The moral precepts, on the other hand, were not abolished because they could not be abolished. To the extent that they reflect the natural law, they are rooted in the unchangeability of human nature and participate in God's eternal law.<sup>20</sup> Thus they applied to all men before the Old Law was given, to all men to whom the Old Law was not given at the time and to all men who have lived after the rest of the Old Law was abrogated.

The New Covenant brought about by the coming of Christ is not fully reflected in either of two famous passages in the Gospels regarding the law. This should not be surprising since the Old Law was still in effect at the time that these two events took place. Let us examine the first passage:

But the Pharisees hearing that he had silenced the Sadducees, came together: And one of them, a doctor of the law, asked him, tempting him: Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said to him: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind.*<sup>21</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.

<sup>18</sup> *Colossians* 2:11-2; cf. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1957) p.350.

<sup>19</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 107, art. 2, ad 1.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 94, art. 5, *corpus*: "The natural law is altogether unchangeable in its first principles."

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Deuteronomy* 6:5.

And the second is like to this: *Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*<sup>22</sup> On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets.<sup>23</sup>

In this instance, Our Lord merely summarizes the moral law by reference to two other summaries from the Old Testament, one from *Leviticus* and the other from *Deuteronomy*. However, they are still in the form of positive and presumably contractual precepts—a difficulty we will deal with shortly. Suffice it to say that He is still speaking the language of the Old Law because the Old Law was still in effect at the time he was speaking. It should be emphasized that His answer is not deficient but rather a preparation of his listeners for the more complete answer to come. The same is true of the second famous passage, the account of the rich young man.<sup>24</sup>

It is only in St. Paul that we receive a full account of the abrogation of the Old Covenant and its replacement with the New Covenant as prophesied in Jeremiah<sup>25</sup>:

But now in Jesus Christ . . . making void the law of commandments contained in decrees. . .<sup>26</sup>

The law written on tablets of stone which Moses received from Mount Sinai is transformed into the fleshy tablets of the heart on which are written the natural law:

I will give my laws in their hearts, and on their minds I will write them.<sup>27</sup>

With these distinctions in mind, we can now revisit the passages cited earlier to grasp their true meaning.

The text from *Baruch* and all similar passages from the Old Testament emphasizing the unchangeableness of the Law attest to the unqualified unchangeableness of the moral precepts

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Leviticus* 19:18.

<sup>23</sup> *Matthew* 22:36-40.

<sup>24</sup> *Matthew* 19:16-30; cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 6-27, pp. 16-42.

<sup>25</sup> *Jeremiah* 31:31-33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ephesians* 2:13-15.

<sup>27</sup> *Hebrews* 10:16; cf. *Jeremiah* 31:33; *Romans* 2:14-15.

as well as the continuity of purpose<sup>28</sup> in the ceremonial and judicial precepts as they are perfected in the New Law. It is false to pretend that we are still obliged to worship God on Saturday as the Third Commandment of Moses requires.<sup>29</sup> We are under a new commandment of the Church to worship God on Sunday by attending Mass and refraining from servile work. Nevertheless the ancient purpose of "outward, visible, public and regular worship"<sup>30</sup> continues to be served in the New Law. In a similar way, baptism comes to be a sort of "circumcision of the heart."<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, the Old Law is both abolished and perpetuated by being fulfilled.<sup>32</sup>

Returning to the text from the fifth chapter of *Matthew*, this passage cannot be interpreted at face value. Certainly the Mosaic dietary laws constitute more than "a jot or tittle" of the Old Law, yet Our Lord renounces them later in the same Gospel.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the passage concludes with the phrase ". . . till all be fulfilled." The Jerusalem translation makes this point even more forcefully: ". . . until its purpose is achieved." To recall St. Thomas' distinction, the moral precepts or natural law will continue "till heaven and earth pass," but the ceremonial and judicial precepts will continue only until the New Law—which Our Lord has already begun to enunciate in this Gospel—has accomplished perfectly what they accomplished only imperfectly.<sup>34</sup>

A similar interpretation must be given to St. Irenæus and the other Fathers, Doctors and Councils of the Church. The Old Law in general and the Decalogue in particular are still operative to the extent that they coincide with the natural law or that their positive precepts have been transformed by

<sup>28</sup> *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, Q. 102, art. 1, *corpus*.

<sup>29</sup> *Colossians* 2:16.

<sup>30</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2176, p. 525.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Colossians* 2:11-13.

<sup>32</sup> *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, Q. 107, art. 2, *ad* 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Matthew* 15:11 ff.; cf. *Colossians* 2:18.

<sup>34</sup> *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, Q. 98, art. 1, *corpus*; cf. *Hebrews* 7:19.

Christ and the Church. Because the Council of Trent spoke with such authority<sup>35</sup>, its pastoral teaching on this matter requires a specific response.

## THE DECALOGUE AND THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

Throughout the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church was under enormous pressure from within and without to reform itself according to an agenda initiated by the Protestant Reformation. A key tenet of that movement was *sola Scriptura*<sup>36</sup> and its implicit indictment of the Church for basing herself on man-made traditions rather than the clear teaching of the Bible. The pastoral response of the Council of Trent, as is evident in its Catechism, was to base as much of its teaching as possible on Sacred Scripture. Part of this pastoral response was to place all moral theology within the framework of the Ten Commandments. While there may have been a rhetorical advantage to this strategy in the sixteenth and possibly the seventeenth centuries, it must be admitted that such an approach does some violence both to the commandments and to the natural law, not to mention moral theology itself. For example, we have already seen that the precepts of the Decalogue are incomplete and stand in need of completion by both the natural law and the New Covenant. However, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, after plausibly stating that willful murder and suicide are contrary to the Fifth Commandment, goes on to assert that anger is forbidden by this commandment as well.<sup>37</sup> The authors justify this apparent leap of logic by a reference to a previously cited passage in *Matthew* in which it

<sup>35</sup> The Second Vatican Council invokes the authority of this earlier council and even declares itself to be "furthering the work begun by the Council of Trent"; Walter M. Abbott, S.J., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966) p. 456, cf. p. 111.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 121-141.

<sup>37</sup> *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, p. 423.

is clear that Our Lord's teaching about anger is *not* included in the Fifth Commandment:

You have heard that it was said to them of old: Thou shall not kill. And whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. *But I say to you*, that whosoever is angry with his brother, shall be in danger of the judgment.<sup>38</sup>

Worse yet, the Sixth Commandment is inexplicably expanded from a narrow prohibition against adultery to a broad mandate on purity including "avoidance of immodest dress."<sup>39</sup> Now it is certain that Scripture frowns on immodest dress.<sup>40</sup> But it is equally certain that it does not do so in the Sixth Commandment.

The approach of the so-called Roman Catechism was clearly pastoral rather than doctrinal. This is evident from the innumerable words and phrases which hedge its authors against an unequivocal endorsement of Decalogue-based morality:

The pastor should give his days and nights to consideration [of the Decalogue]<sup>41</sup>. . . . The pastor should propose to himself and others notions for keeping the Commandments<sup>42</sup>. . . . But lest the people, *aware of the abrogation of the Mosaic Law*, may imagine that the precepts of the Decalogue are no longer obligatory, *it should be taught* that when God gave the Law to Moses, He did not so much establish a new code, as render more luminous that divine light (that is, the law of nature) which the depraved minds and long-continued perversity of man had at that time almost

<sup>38</sup> *Matthew* 5:21-22 [emphasis added]. St. Thomas also cites this text in making a similar point about anger and the Fifth Commandment. However, he is careful to point out that the precept is an addition to the commandment rather than an extension of it; Joseph Collins, *The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1939) p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, p. 437.

<sup>40</sup> *Ecclesiasticus* 9:8; Of course, immodesty is contrary to the natural law as well; *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 60, art. 1, 2, *corpus*.

<sup>41</sup> *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, p. 357.

<sup>42</sup> *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, p. 358.

obscured. It is most certain that *we are not bound to obey the Commandments because they were delivered by Moses*, but because they are implanted in the hearts of all, and have been explained and confirmed by Christ our Lord.<sup>43</sup>

It is evident that the authors of the Catechism are attempting to teach the natural law under the rather transparent guise of teaching the Decalogue.

It is important to understand that the pastoral approach to morality identified with the Council of Trent was something of a novelty.<sup>44</sup> From the classical tradition of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero through the medieval tradition of St. Thomas and Dante, morality had generally been taught from the point of view of the four cardinal virtues.<sup>45</sup> By way of illustration, St. Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* contains over one hundred *quaestiones* on the virtues of temperance, courage, justice and prudence<sup>46</sup> but only one on "the moral precepts of the Old Law."<sup>47</sup> Again, souls are arranged in Dante's *Inferno* according to the gravity of their vices, not according to their infractions of the Decalogue.<sup>48</sup>

The case of Ireland is of particular significance in this context. Irish Catholics, strongly rooted in medieval traditions

<sup>43</sup> *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, pp. 358-359 [emphasis added].

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Gillespie, *The Sacred in the Secular: Religious Change in Catholic Ireland, 1500-1700*, (Colchester, VT: St. Michael's College, 1993), p. 14: "The seven deadly sins . . . in Europe had been replaced by the Decalogue as a basis for moral obligation as a part of growing insistence on scripturally based ethics."

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 94, art. 3, *corpus*: "All virtuous acts belong to the natural law."

<sup>46</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 47-148.

<sup>47</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 100.; At the same time, it must be noted that even St. Thomas himself used the more pastoral approach when preaching to "students and townfolk"; cf. Collins, pp. ix, 67-116.

<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that an exposition of morality based on virtue and vice is formally distinct from an exposition based strictly on the natural law. However, both emphasize human nature in a way in which the divine positive law, which is characteristic of the Decalogue, does not.

and lacking any serious Protestant influence among the people, saw no need for the reforms of Trent:

The explanation of the failure of Irish Catholicism to conform to the Tridentine model [is] . . . the way Irish Catholicism had functioned in the late medieval period. . . . The catechisms based on the Roman Catechism stressed the Decalogue as a basis for moral teaching whereas traditional Irish Catholicism had relied on the moral code as expressed by the Seven Deadly Sins. . . . The Decalogue was not part of the normal religious education in Ireland.<sup>49</sup>

#### "MAIMONIDES" AND THE NATURAL LAW

We have already seen some of the inconveniences and incongruities that attach to teaching morality according to the Ten Commandments. It is left to show that there are certain dangers—or at least dangerous tendencies—that attach to it as well. The principal danger lies in viewing the Old Law in general and the Decalogue in particular in the same terms as those to whom the Revelation was originally made: the people of Israel.

In an article on the difference between Christianity and Judaism on the natural law, Professor Marvin Fox researches "the classical Jewish tradition as it is formulated in the Bible, the rabbinic literature, and in the works of the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages."<sup>50</sup> His conclusion is somewhat startling:

Classical Judaism and classical Christianity have profoundly differing views of natural law. In Judaism there is no natural

<sup>49</sup> Gillespie, pp. 8–9.

<sup>50</sup> Marvin Fox, *Studies on Maimonides and St. Thomas Aquinas*, "Maimonides and Aquinas on Natural Law" (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1975), p. 97; Prof. Fox's citations of Maimonides must be taken with a grain of salt. His article is far more useful for its articulation of the rabbinical tradition of interpreting Maimonides than for explaining Maimonides himself.

law doctrine, and, in principle, there cannot be, while in classical Christian thought natural law plays a central role.<sup>51</sup>

A number of important points follow from this and it will be useful to paraphrase here the position of classical Judaism on the Old Law as reflected in Prof. Fox's account of Maimonides:

As a consequence of Adam's sin, man is born into the world with a darkened intellect, weakened will and inflamed passions.<sup>52</sup> Thus he is incapable of knowing good and evil. In other words, there is no basis in reason or logic for a natural law or even an ethical code based on social utility.<sup>53</sup> The only criterion of right and wrong are the divinely revealed precepts of the Mosaic Law.<sup>54</sup> These precepts are positive in the sense they proceed not from the end or final cause of human nature but from the sovereign will of God.<sup>55</sup> Each precept could have been otherwise if God had so chosen. Instead of prohibiting theft, God could just as well have commanded a daily act of theft. The precepts of the Mosaic law apply not to the gentiles, but only to the Israelites to whom the revelation is given and with whom the covenant is sealed, not to the gentiles.<sup>56</sup> Whether the gentiles blaspheme or not blaspheme, commit adultery or not commit adultery, is a matter of indifference to the Mosaic Law. Finally, there is no essential distinction between moral, ceremonial and judicial precepts.<sup>57</sup> The Decalogue and the dietary laws are equally divinely revealed commandments which proceed from the same arbitrary divine will.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Fox, p. 75.

<sup>52</sup> Fox, p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> Fox, p. 78.

<sup>54</sup> Fox, p. 76, 77, 78, 80.

<sup>55</sup> This emphasis on the will of God clearly extends beyond Judaism to certain schools of Christian thought, especially in the Middle Ages.

<sup>56</sup> Fox, p. 83–84; cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, Q. 98, art. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Fox, p. 78.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Fox, pp. 90–91; Maimonides insists that God is not capricious,

In Catholic theology, adultery is ultimately wrong because it is contrary to human nature, not so much because it breaks a commandment or violates the will of God. It is more accurate to say that it breaks a commandment or violates the will of God because it is wrong. Otherwise, it is easy to slip into a Maimonidean mode and away from Catholic theology altogether. A few Catholics speak as if the Decalogue were a set of arbitrary provisions in a kind of contract with God: "If I play by the rules, God will let me into heaven." One often hears the expression "Catholic morality" used as if non-Catholics were bound by a different moral code, or worse, as if they were not expected to act morally at all. For example, many devout Catholics speak as if the prohibition against contraception were a divine positive law binding only on Catholics. In some cases, the Maimonidean element is glaring. In one popular catechism, the Decalogue-based morality section is entitled, "The Will of God."<sup>59</sup> Even educated Catholics firmly believe they are obeying *the letter* of the Third Commandment when they participate at Mass on Sunday. All of these errors are unintended consequences of teaching morality according to the Decalogue.

## POSTSCRIPT

The mandate of the Second Vatican Council was an *aggiornamento* of the Church. The challenges and opportunities of the sixteenth century are not the challenges and opportunities of today. Furthermore, "the institutions, laws and modes of thinking and feeling as handed down from previous generations do not always seem to be well adapted to the contemporary state of affairs."<sup>60</sup> The pastoral concern of the Council

but a certain degree of arbitrariness in God would appear consistent with his position.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. John A. Hardon, S.J., *The Pocket Catechism* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1989), p. 203-300.

<sup>60</sup> *Documents of Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes*, n. 7, p. 205.

of Trent was a confrontation with the Protestant world<sup>61</sup>; the pastoral concern of the Second Vatican Council is a dialogue with the whole human race.<sup>62</sup> The Council saw a particular need for *aggiornamento* in moral matters: "Special attention needs to be given to the development of moral theology."<sup>63</sup>

It is for these and other reasons that the Council appears to call upon all Catholics to lay aside the pastoral language of Trent regarding the Decalogue and to resume the language of the natural law. The Council is unambiguous in endorsing the teaching method of St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>64</sup> who, as we have already seen, follows the order of the natural law almost exclusively.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, the widespread abandonment of Decalogue-based moral teaching after the Council merely created a vacuum which appears to have been filled by various extravagances rather than virtue-based moral teaching. The Pope himself calls attention to this phenomenon:

. . . Within the context of the theological debates which followed the Council, there have developed *certain interpretations of Christian morality which are not consistent with sound teaching*. . . . Certain tendencies in contemporary moral theology, under the influence of the currents of subjectivism and individualism . . . involve novel interpretations of the

<sup>61</sup> Protestant theologians are no longer unanimous in upholding Decalogue-based morality. cf. Ivor Bailey, *The Ten Commandments* (Melbourne: JBCE, 1992), p. 29: "We therefore acknowledge that the [third] commandment is not binding on Christians."

<sup>62</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 2, p. 200.

<sup>63</sup> *Documents of Vatican II, Optatam Totius*, n. 16, p. 452.

<sup>64</sup> *Gravissimum Educationis*, n. 10, p. 648; cf. *Optatam Totius*, n. 16, pp. 452.

<sup>65</sup> Three excellent examples of teaching morality according to the virtue method of St. Thomas are John A. McHugh, O.P. and Charles J. Callan, O.P., *Moral Theology* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1958), Austin Fagothy, *Right and Reason* (St. Louis: C.V. Mosby, 1959) and Dominic M. Prümmer, O.P., *Handbook of Moral Theology* (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1957).



## THE DECALOGUE AND THE NATURAL LAW

relationship of freedom to the moral law, human nature and conscience, and propose novel criteria for the moral evaluation of acts. Despite their variety, these tendencies are all at one in lessening or even denying the *dependence of freedom on truth*.<sup>66</sup>

It is incumbent upon both scholars and teachers of moral theology to heed the words of both the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II. They must avoid the Scylla of misguided traditionalism and the Charybdis of unhinged innovation. Such a course can only be steered "under the tutelage of St. Thomas."<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 29, p. 45; n. 34, p. 50; [emphases in original].

<sup>67</sup> *Documents of Vatican II, Optatam Totius*, n. 16, p. 452.

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