

Morality and Christian Morality

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In his recent work *Das Natürliche und das Vernünftige*, Robert Spaemann has drawn attention to the famous questions of Kant: the metaphysical, what can we know? the ethical, what should we do? and the religious, what can we hope for? In his *Logik*, Kant formulates a fourth question taken from *Psalms* 8: what is man? This is how metaphysics, ethics, and religion lead to anthropology. Feuerbach was not the first to point out that all theology is but anthropology. But in trying to answer the anthropological question, Kant came to the conclusion that there is no answer to it. The dualism of the “physiological” and “pragmatic” views of man make it impossible to have a unified vision of man, thus going back to the Cartesian dualism of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*.

For his part, Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, and later in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, has made a remarkable effort to recover the metaphysical ground of morality by showing the implausibility of both Nietzsche’s and Marx’s attempts to start a new anthropology, as well as the equally unsuccessful and inadequate attempts of Weber, Dilthey, and Heidegger. A similar attempt was made by the present writer in *The Roots of Society: The Metaphysical Background of Social Ethics* (first ed., 1977; second, 1984).

Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of The American Mind*, has made a similar attempt, but by falling back into the shallows of the Enlightenment he has offered a rather anti-climactic solution to the problem he has so brilliantly diagnosed, as Mortimer J. Adler has noted. The contributions of John Finnis, William May, and Germain Grisez are also worth noting.

We can easily detect in these writers and other essayists humankind's perennial overriding interest in morality. But we can also sometimes detect the equally perennial tendency of thinkers to entangle themselves in subtle complications which obscure, rather than clarify, the issues through the fear of being labelled "simplistic." It is true that there is always a risk of oversimplifying, but it is also true that wisdom possesses simplicity as well as depth and is definitely not complicated.

Volumes have been written on moral philosophy over the centuries, but we cannot say that the majority of them qualify as wisdom. Jacques Maritain's contribution, however, does qualify, as is evident in such works as *The Degrees of Knowledge*, *The Range of Reason*, and *Moral Philosophy*. Drawing a powerful force from the Thomist conception of knowledge by connaturality, he has applied this notion brilliantly to the fields of metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and mysticism. He deals with these subjects with greater success than Kant. In providing a basis for a clarification of moral philosophy, Maritain avoids the pitfalls of Nietzsche's nihilism, as well as all forms of moral relativism. These virtues appear especially in *An Introduction to The Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*.

The purpose of this paper, adapted from my book *Christ and The Moral Life* (1983), is to attempt a further clarification and simplification (but not an oversimplification) of the perennial ethical questions by considering them in the context of biblical theology. Jesus was once approached by a young man who wanted to know what he should do "to have eternal life."¹ Jesus answered him in no uncertain terms: "Keep the commandments." And when the young man asked for a clarification, Jesus gave him a summarized list of the moral commandments as they were taught to the Jews ever since the times of Moses. The Ten Commandments given to Moses² were nothing but the explicit declaration (what is called divine-positive law) by God himself of the eternal moral laws (the natural law), inscribed in every man's heart but often difficult to recognize by man in practice, due to the weakness of his fallen nature.³ In fact, it was this plight of man that, according to the First Vatican Council, moved God's mercy to

¹Matthew, 19:16.

²Exodus, 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy, 5:6-21.

³Romans, 2:15.

explicitly reveal the natural moral law, a revelation which reached its final and perfect form in Christ.⁴ In this regard, the Second Vatican Council states the following:

Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very dawn of history man abused his liberty, at the urging of personified evil. Man set himself against God and sought to find fulfillment apart from God. Although he knew God, he did not glorify Him as God, but his senseless mind was darkened and he served the creature rather than the Creator (cf., *Romans* 1:21–25). What divine revelation makes known to us agrees with experience. Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own intimate goal. At the same time he became out of harmony with himself, with others, and with all created things. Therefore man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains. But the Lord himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out that prince of this world (cf. *John* 8:34). For sin has diminished man, blocking his path to fulfillment. The call to grandeur and the depths of misery are both a part of human experience. They find their ultimate and simultaneous explanation in the light of God's revelation.⁵

Two questions in this regard have always in one way or another stirred the human heart, but they have acquired peculiar features in our age: an age that tends to pitch chance against permanence; the physical against the moral; the temporal against the eternal; facts against values; with a bewildering display of complex combinations which often erupt into personal and social crises and upheavals.

The first of these questions asks: what is the relationship between the moral laws as applicable to all men, if there is such a thing, and the moral law given by Christ to his disciples? This question involves

⁴Denzinger edition, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1785–1786.

⁵Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 13 (Abbott Edition of Vatican II Documents. All subsequent quotations from Vatican II are from this Edition).

the issue of the dialogue of the Church and the world, which the Second Vatican Council tackled extensively in its Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*. The second question asks whether the moral law, either natural or Christian, is subject to change in any sense?

What follows is an attempt to discuss these two questions in the light of what the Church has always taught about the moral law, especially following the Second Vatican Council. But it is a matter of justice to acknowledge my debt to the teachings of the Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. The official decree (February 19, 1981)⁶ advocating his beatification and canonization called him the forerunner of the Second Vatican Council for having proclaimed loudly and clearly the evangelical call of all men and women to holiness, i.e., to the continuous progress in the moral life, and for having instituted suitable means—the sanctification of everyday work⁷—for the attainment of this goal by ordinary people in the world.

Another characteristic of our age is the lack of time and leisure for unhurried reading, heightened by the growing competition for attention from the mass media. To condense ideas thus becomes a necessity, while providing references for further information and reflection. This is the approach I have tried to follow, keeping the text as short as possible without sacrificing substance.

1. *Morality and Christian Morality*

A few years ago I wrote an essay entitled “Education and Christian Education,”⁸ in which I tried to show the essential link between humanity and Christianity along the line of the well-known principle that divine grace does not suppress human nature but brings it to perfection.

Likewise, Christian morality is not cut off from natural morality, although, since divine grace is an entirely gratuitous gift from God to man to which the latter has no right, we cannot say that human nature strictly needs divine grace for its completion, or that natural

⁶*Rivista Diocesana di Roma*, March-April, 1981.

⁷J. L. Illanes, *On the Theology of Work. Aspects of the Teaching of the Founder of Opus Dei* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1982).

⁸Published by Catholic Position Papers, Ashiya, Japan, October, 1975, and reprinted as a chapter of my book, *The Leaven of the Gospel of Secular Society* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1983).

morality is incomplete without the Gospel. However, we can say that, since human nature is a damaged nature, it needs outside assistance for its healing, the source of which only comes as a non-obligatory merciful condescension from the only being who is above man. And in like manner can a divinely-revealed (Christian) morality come to heal, or to fill in the gaps of natural morality, without changing its fundamental orientation?

What is the link between morality and Christian morality? The term “morality” has three analogical meanings: a) the factual status of moral standards in a given social milieu; b) the science of morals or ethics which studies the principles and rules of human behavior as human; and c) the quality peculiar to human acts whereby they are intrinsically related to moral standards. This last captures the primary meaning of the term “morality,” and must be carefully scrutinized in order to understand the other two properly. It shows the characteristic transcendence of human nature, which is the basis of the unique dignity of every human being and of his or her inalienable rights.

Man's Transcendence

Man transcends or goes beyond himself, and hence beyond temporal society precisely through the ethical dimension of his being, whereby he subordinates his temporal existence to an eternal set of values deriving from an eternal source. This eternal source is seen as both origin and end of man, and indeed of all beings.⁹

When man acts with that freedom proper to him, which consists in the power of directing his own acts to their end with personal responsibility and with no outside coercion, his acts have a moral quality inhering in them and hence in the human person who performs them.¹⁰ This moral quality is measured not quantitatively but by its intensity of goodness, i.e., by its degree of approximation to the right end.¹¹ And since God is the last end (the infinite good) of man, the morality of human acts is measured by their conformity to the eternal law of God, which is called natural law when discovered by human reason as the law governing man's free decisions.

⁹Joseph M. de Torre, *The Roots of Society* (Manila: Sinag-tala, 1977), ch. I.

¹⁰As distinct from the divine freedom, which is equivalent to divine omnipotence.

¹¹Joseph M. de Torre, *Christian Philosophy* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 2nd ed., 1981), ch. 23, d.

Moral Values

This is the natural morality guiding every single human being in every sociological setting. It is learned gradually as human reason grows which evidences the paramount importance of parental education for moral awareness: for values to be assimilated they must be first inculcated in a living experience of communication.

At first human reason is simply a power or faculty waiting to be actuated. This actuation happens when, confronted with reality, reason asks the first two original questions: what is it? and what is it for? The first aims to know and the second to do; the first is speculative or theoretical, the second active or practical; the first is answered with a first concept (“being”) and a first judgment (“to be and not to be are incompatible”), both in the speculative order; the second is answered with another first concept (“good”) and another first judgment (“good should be done and evil avoided”), both in the practical order.¹²

With this first principle of practical reason, which the Greeks called *synderesis*, man possesses the tool for discovering the precepts of the natural law. “Good” is the perfection of being. Man has a power (reason or intelligence) to know being and a power (will) to act in order to perfect his own being, which are both without limits: only the infinite being or infinite good can satisfy them. Man’s thirst for perfection is as insatiable as is his frustration unrequitable when he sets his ultimate goals on finite goods and thus falls into sin, the only real evil.

Thus breaks into light the first precept of the natural law: “Love God above all things.” And the second follows from the first: “Love other beings as creatures of God,” i.e., bearing in mind their relationship to God.¹³

Natural Law and Civilization

From the first of these two fundamental precepts derives that of worshipping God with adoration, thanksgiving, atonement, and petition (religion). From the second derives that of loving humanity as the point of confluence of creatures and Creator, as the reflection of God in his creation; and from this, that of loving other human beings

¹²*Ibid.*, ch 38, f.

¹³Joseph M. de Torre, *The Roots of Society* (Manila: Sinag-tala, 1977), note 43.

as much as one ought to love one's own humanity; out of this love emerges self-esteem; social and personal love and justice; respect and honor for sex as the God-given source of human life; and commitment to truth. The Biblical Ten Commandments spell out these imperatives of the natural law.

All cultures and civilizations have in varying degrees attained this understanding of the natural law, with recurring relapses into barbarism and savagery. Indeed, sometimes in an institutionalized fashion, and most often in the individual behavior of their people, they have fallen into distortions and outright errors, both theoretical and practical, due to the patent damage of human nature revealed in the tendency to *rationalize*, i.e., to surrender reason to selfish emotion.

Divine Revelation

God's pity for man's plight has been manifested in the Judeo-Christian revelation, wherein God, speaking through a living tradition enshrined in the Bible and sustained by God's own authority, has actually told man how he should live in order to attain his last end. This end he has communicated in a twofold way: by disclosing this goal as being above human nature (as being supernatural, depending, in fact, on a free divine decision) and by bringing it wondrously closer to man by taking on himself a damaged human nature, thus radically healing it by raising it to his own divine level.

This divine revelation has shed powerful light on man's understanding of the natural law without in any way supplanting it, just as grace does not suppress nature but brings it to its perfection. The Ten Commandments (divine-positive law) given to Moses do not promulgate a new law, but only specify the two fundamental precepts of the natural law (love of God and neighbor): the first three commandments capture the former precept; the remaining seven, the latter.¹⁴ But The Ten Commandments are then summarized in these two: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength,¹⁵ and love your neighbor as yourself.¹⁶ Thus, Jesus would answer the question from the Doctor of the Law: "Master, which is the

¹⁴*Exodus*, 20:1–17; *Deuteronomy*, 5:6–21.

¹⁵*Deuteronomy*, 6:5, 10–12, 11–13.

¹⁶*Leviticus*, 19:18.

great commandment of the Law?"¹⁷ And that is why he said that he had not come "to destroy the Law or the Prophets" but "to fulfill."¹⁸

The New Commandment

In what way did Jesus bring natural morality to its perfection, transfiguring it, so to speak, without changing its substance? The answer is found in the *Mandatum Novum*: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: that, as I have loved you, you also love one another. By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."¹⁹

This commandment is new, not in the sense that it abolishes the old commandments, but in the sense that it raises their standard to the summit of perfection. This is the love which is distinctively Christian, and a distinctive mark of Christians. Besides, Christians are provided with the means to attain that kind of love, namely a communion of life with Christ himself: a life of faith in Christ, hope in Christ, and love in Christ through the sacraments instituted by him and left to his Church.

Christ has transformed the meaning of love by enriching it, expanding it, heightening it, and making it surpass itself, but without changing it altogether. This can be seen by comparing the evangelical *agape* expressed in the New Commandment with both the Platonic *eros* and the Aristotelian *philia*.²⁰

First, love is a passion: an inclination toward what appears to be good or an abhorrence of what appears to be bad. For animals "good" is what is pleasant and "bad" is what is unpleasant; this is not quite the case with rationally intelligent beings as these can perceive the real value of things regardless of their feelings about them. If men are inclined to possess the good, it is because they do not yet possess it. This is a manifestation of both the imperfection and the potential of man. The inclination to possess the good absent from the lover Plato calls *eros*. It is good in itself, and shows both the wealth and the indigence of man; it is the attraction to what is good in order to perfect oneself.

¹⁷Matthew, 22:35–40; cf. Mark, 12:28–34; Luke, 10:25–28.

¹⁸Matthew, 5:17; cf. Luke, 16:17.

¹⁹John, 13:34–35.

²⁰Joseph M. de Torre, *The Roots of Society* (Manila: Sinag-tala, 1977), p. 5.

A second meaning of love is the inclination to share what one already possesses. The discovery of other beings with the same nature and goals creates fellowship, friendship, and sharing. It implies “give and take,” but not so much *acquiring* in the Platonic sense. Aristotle calls this love *philia*, and considers social friendship as the indispensable force to preserve society.

What about the love that God has for his creatures? It cannot be *eros* because there is nothing that he does not possess. Nor can it be *philia* since God has no need to share in order to attain a greater good by giving and taking. Not surprisingly, neither Plato nor Aristotle ever thought of a God who loves his creatures. Only the Bible reveals this love.

God is Love

Agape means pure and total giving, without sharing or any inclination to anything in return: sheer benevolence.²¹ God gives without losing. He loves his creatures by wanting them *to be*. He gives them a created participation of being and goodness.²² This is why God is called “love,” because in him goodness overflows in creation: *bonum diffusivum sui*.²³ “The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.”²⁴ The Book of *Wisdom* expresses the point admirably:

For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you? But you spare all things, because they are yours. O Lord and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things!²⁵

This creation involves not only making things be, but also *preserving* them in being, leading them to their end and *providing* for them; and in the case of man re-creating him by *redeeming* him through an elevation to the supernatural life of faith, hope, and love.

²¹St. Francis de Sales deals with this subject in a classical fashion in his *Treatise on the Love of God*. Benevolence is incidentally, the basic human virtue for Confucius.

²²Creatures are not “pieces” of God (pantheism) but created beings which are not fullness of being, since what they actually are is limited by what they can be (actuality limited by potentiality).

²³*John*, 4:8 and 16.

²⁴*Psalms*, 144:9.

²⁵*Wisdom*, 11:24–26.

The redemption of man is achieved through the incarnation of the Son of God, which is a convergence of the love of God, i.e., the Holy Spirit, and of perfect humanity, i.e., the Virgin Mary.²⁶ God thus re-creates humanity through the incarnation and the redemption which is accomplished by the perfect priest or mediator between God and man,²⁷ with the perfect sacrifice and atonement.²⁸ This is why we say that in Christ is found both the love of God for man and the love of man for God. Christ is thus the Pontifex or “bridge-man.”

The actual sacrifice of Christ, his most humiliating and sorrowful passion and cross, perpetuated and made present in the Holy Mass, is the true *agape* of God overflowing with generosity, teaching men that they should love without limits.²⁹ “No one has ever seen God. If we should love one another, God abides in us. In this we know we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his spirit. We have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son to be savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God.”³⁰ This kind of love does not contradict *eros* nor *philia* but empowers them beyond themselves; hence the unique originality of Christian morals.

The pre-Christian philosophers could not even catch a faint glimpse of that love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Of them, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, from Justin to Aquinas, would say that, while they did discover the goal, they never knew the way.³¹

2. *Christian Morality as Revealed by God*

Christian morality does not contradict natural morality, as we have seen, but neither is it a logical consequence of it; that is to say, neither

²⁶*Luke*, 1:28–35. “At the message of the Angel, the Virgin Mary received the Word of God in her heart and in her body, and gave Life to the world. Hence she is acknowledged and honored as being truly the Mother of God. As a result she is also the favorite daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit.” (Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const., *Lumen Gentium*, no 53).

²⁷*I Timothy*, 2:5.

²⁸*Hebrews*, 9:11–26.

²⁹*Matthew*, 5:38–48; 18:21–22.

³⁰*John*, 4:12–15.

³¹The present Pope has been driving home precisely this point: the attainment of a real humanism, that is, a full Christianity that raises what is best in humanity by means of communion with God. See particularly his first three Encyclicals, *Redemptor Hominis*, *Dives in Misericordia*, and *Laborem Exercens*.

is it a morality that man could discover by his own reasoning alone. Both faith in the divinity of Christ and the morality that derives from it are a gift from God, not a product of “flesh and blood.”³² Thus was it defined by the First Vatican Council.³³

Christian morality is the ethical aspect of the divine revelation made by God through the prophets and brought to a climax in Christ,³⁴ who entrusted it to the Apostles,³⁵ giving them the authority to transmit it to all generations by the power of the Holy Spirit.³⁶ This is what we call the Magisterium, the teaching office of the Church.³⁷ The Church cannot change the content of this revelation but only interpret it.³⁸ This also applies to Christian morality and to natural law brought to perfection by it.³⁹

³²See Peter’s confession of faith in the divinity of Jesus, and the latter’s reply to it: Matthew 16:16–17.

³³“Faith is a supernatural virtue whereby under God’s inspiration and with the help of his grace, we believe that the things revealed by him are true, not on account of the intrinsic truth of those things perceived by the natural light of reason, but on account of the authority of God himself who reveals, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.” (Const., *Dei Filius*, ch. 3: Denzinger, 1789).

³⁴“After speaking in many places and varied ways through the prophets, God ‘last of all in these days has spoken to us by his son’ (Heb. 1:1–2). For he sent his Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all men, so that he might dwell among men and tell them the innermost realities about God (cf. Jn. 1:1–18).” (Second Vatican Council, Const., *Dei Verbum*, 4).

³⁵“Christ the Lord, in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (cf. *II Corinthians*, 1:20; 3:16; 4:6), commissioned the apostles to preach to all men that gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching” (cf. *Matthew*, 28:19–20, and *Mark*, 16:15; Council of Trent, session IV, Decree on Scriptural Canons: Denzinger, 783 (1501). (*Ibid.*, 7).

³⁶*John*, 16:14. “And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way by a continuous succession of preachers until the end of time. . . . This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit (cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const., ch. 4, ‘On Faith and Reason’: Denzinger, 1800 (3020).” (Second Vatican Council, Const., *Dei Verbum*, no. 8).

³⁷“The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on (cf. I Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. on the Catholic Faith, ch. 3 ‘On Faith’: Denzinger, 1792 [3011]), has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church (cf. Pius XII, enc. *Humani Generis*, Aug. 12, 1950: AAS 42 [1950], pp. 568–569: Denzinger, 2314 [3886], whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10).

³⁸“This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit.” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10).

³⁹“No believer will wish to deny that the teaching authority of the Church is competent to interpret even the natural moral law. It is, in fact, indisputable, as Our Predecessors have many times declared, that Jesus Christ, when communicating to Peter and the Apostles His

Can Morality Change?

No human activity can change Christian morality or natural morality. What does change, however, is the actual manner in which man understands it. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has expressed it well:

There can be no true promotion of man's dignity unless the essential order of his nature is respected. Of course, in the history of civilization many of the concrete conditions and needs of human life have changed and will continue to change. But all evolution of morals and every type of life must be kept within the limits imposed by the immutable principles based upon every human person's constitutive elements and essential relations—elements and relations which transcend historical contingency.⁴⁰

There are two main reasons for the fluctuations of man's understanding of the natural law:

- (a) The weakness of man: his tendency to rationalize his emotional attachments by appealing to cultural factors, or to economic or social conditions, in short, factors extrinsic to him, conditions which are often used as scapegoats: "Hence, those many people are in error who today assert that one can find neither in human nature nor in the revealed law any absolute and immutable norm to serve for particular actions other than the one which expresses itself in the general law of charity and respect for human dignity. As a proof of their assertions they put forward the view that so-called norms of the natural law or precepts of sacred scripture are to be regarded only as given expressions of a form of particular culture at a certain moment of history."⁴¹
- (b) The wealth of divine revelation: the enormous demands of the moral life that may require a gradual acceptance on the

divine authority and sending them to teach all nations His commandments, constituted them as guardians and authentic interpreters of all moral law, not only, that is, of the law of the gospel, but also of the natural law, which is also an expression of the will of God, the faithful fulfillment of which is equally necessary for salvation." (Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, July 25, 1968, no. 4).

⁴⁰Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Sexual Ethics, 29 December, 1975, no. 3.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, no. 4.

part of man, God leading him with a wise pedagogy along a gently upward slope.

This is why, for example, polygamy and divorce were tolerated among God's chosen people until Christ came and told them that it was not so "from the beginning";⁴² it was a concession allowed or tolerated by God, although it indeed was a backward step on man's part. In other words, it was a concession "by reason of the hardness of your hearts."⁴³ But this type of concession is not possible now that the fullness of divine revelation has been made in Christ: no lowering of moral standards is henceforth logically possible.⁴⁴ Christ never condones or "permits" sin. What he does is always to forgive the sins of those who are repentant. The Church founded by Christ follows the same line: she cannot condone, permit, or "legalize" sins; through her ordained ministers, however, she can always forgive sins confessed in the sacrament of penance with true repentance.

The Beatific Vision

Christ reveals the last end of man most explicitly by identifying it with the beatific vision, which is the indescribable enjoyment of the possession of God by facial vision and love: "we shall see him just as he is";⁴⁵ "we see now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face."⁴⁶

This supernatural destiny of man is communicated to us through grace,⁴⁷ and Christ reveals himself as the way to that end.⁴⁸ In this life, it is through grace—a created participation in the divine life itself⁴⁹—that man is able to attain an imperfect though real union with the Blessed Trinity. It is a true enlightenment that would have baffled Plato and Aristotle, for whom man, when facing God, is like an owl facing the sun. This is indeed true on account of both the wealth of the object and the weakness of the subject. But God's revelation in Christ

⁴²Matthew, 19:3–9.

⁴³Matthew, 19:8.

⁴⁴Cf. note 35.

⁴⁵I John, 3:2.

⁴⁶I Corinthians, 13–12.

⁴⁷John, 1:17; Romans, 6:23; 7:25; 11:6; Titus, 2:11; Ephesians, 2:7.

⁴⁸John, 1:14–18; 14:6.

⁴⁹John, 4:14; 15:5; Ephesians, 4:15; II Peter, 1:4.

so empowers man's capacity that he is raised to the understanding of divine mysteries, as the First Vatican Council states.⁵⁰

Grace comes to man as the light of faith in this life, and the light of glory after this life: "Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I have been known. So there abide faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity,"⁵¹ when faith will become vision.

The Enlightenment of Faith

Thus faith is both darkness and light. It is darkness in relation to God because, if we look at him directly, we are dazzled by the excess of light, like an owl facing the sun. God reveals himself to us through the twilight of analogy.⁵² He remains incomprehensible to us in himself, since the infinite cannot be encompassed by the finite. God "dwells in light inaccessible, whom no man has seen or can see."⁵³ But faith is light in relation to man because when we look at the things of the world bathed in light that shines from divine revelation, we understand them in their true meaning and value: we see them in their true light. "For with you is the fountain of life, and in your light we see light."⁵⁴

What then does grace do to man? Since man's natural powers are inadequate to attain a supernatural end, he needs to be given (though God is not thereby obliged to do so) a new set of powers which are supernatural and wherewith he can reach the supernatural end. These powers or abilities have to be communicated or infused into man from outside himself: they cannot come from within man because then they would be merely natural powers.

Supernatural Life

These infused powers come in the form of habits or virtues called supernatural virtues. There are two sets of them: one concerned with God himself, namely the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity;

⁵⁰Denzinger, 1796.

⁵¹*I Corinthians*, 13:12–13.

⁵²"For from the greatness and beauty of created things their original author, by analogy is seen." (*Wisdom*, 13:5).

⁵³*I Timothy*, 6:16.

⁵⁴*Psalms*, 35:10.

and the other with human conduct in general, namely the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. To these are added the gifts of the Holy Spirit,⁵⁵ whom we have received along with “the charity of God”:⁵⁶ the gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. These gifts are not stable dispositions, like the virtues, but rather are like flashes of divine power that enhance human acts depending on the intensity of man’s love of God.

This is then how grace raises nature, thus healing it and saving it. Man is neither totally innocent and in no need of grace, nor totally corrupt and incapable of being saved. He has no natural ability for self-salvation, but he has the obediencial capacity to be raised to the supernatural level by grace and thus be saved. In other words, he can only obey or respond to the healing action of grace and cooperate with it.⁵⁷

Faith and Reason

The relationship of Christian morality to natural morality is parallel to that of grace to nature, to that of faith to reason, and to that of theology to philosophy. This was St. Thomas’s idea in writing the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, a book addressed to those outside Christianity. There he presented the natural moral law as common ground for Christian and non-Christian alike, showing the latter that Christian revelation contains the answers to the deepest questions of philosophy. Not only is there no conflict between reason and faith, but in fact there is a marvelous continuity and harmony between both.

Two conclusions follow therefrom, as a summary of this article:

- (a) that Christians must be the strongest defenders of the natural law, for the love of humanity;
- (b) that the Church, as recipient of divine revelation, has in her Magisterium the authority to explain and interpret the natural law.⁵⁸

⁵⁵*Isaiah*, 11:2–3.

⁵⁶*Romans*, 5:5.

⁵⁷All this doctrine on justification was elucidated and authoritatively defined by the Council of Trent, in response to the Protestant belief in the “total” corruption of human nature which would make the latter incurable.

⁵⁸Cf. note 39.