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Personal Growth:
Up-Dating the Natural Law

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In his first editorial, the new editor of the Linacre Quarterly presented a challenge to moral theologians to contribute sound theological opinion to discussions on some pressing contemporary problems so as to give guidance where possible in controversial areas within the framework of our traditional beliefs and concepts (November, 1969, pp. 211-212). Certainly, the reader of this journal will concur with Dr. Mullooly that "we are living in a peculiar, revolutionary age where everything that has been "given," and taken for granted is suddenly new." Man naturally wants to reject those concepts, to live by his own rational nature, and to replace any natural law if it conflicts with his conception of justice and morality. This is understandable, as the human being is rational and creative, and does not always readily accept the ethical and moral precepts of the Church, which are based on a natural law which is unchanging. In line with the purpose of this issue, it will attempt to show how the natural law theory is not an outside watchdog guarding the ethics of psychiatry, psychology, mental health services and other areas of medical practice touching on these specialties, but instead that the natural law grows out of and is based on some concepts quite familiar to these areas of scientific and medical concern.

What is the natural law and how certain is it? There are a number of popular assumptions among Catholics and about "Catholic teaching on the natural law" among those of other faiths which need exposing. It is sometimes assumed that when all else fails in giving sure answers there is the natural law to fall back on, because it is unchanging. It is further supposed that the natural law refers to a series of formulated assertions on what man ought to do in many areas of his life, that these "precepts of the natural law" are solidly based on the unchanging nature of man as rational animal, and that these precepts are incontestable because they come from the author of nature. For example, it is presumed that marriage is not only viable but indispensable to human existence and human behavior in the light of the call of grace from God.

Due to these variables, and because we are now faced with the need to rely more and more on Scripture and to speak a common voice with our separated Christian brethren in addressing ourselves to the moral problems of the day, there are some who suggest that the natural law should be scrapped, that it has had its day. However, there are many of us in the field of Catholic moral theology who believe that, if viewed in the true Christian fashion and if based on the best available knowledge of the meaning of man, a natural law theory is not only viable but indispensable to Christian morality. Some of the components of a Christian natural law theory as conceived by theologians nowadays, in the light of the teaching of Aquinas and contemporary anthropological philosophy and theology, can be summarized under two headings:

1. In the proper sense of the term, the natural law is an unformulated moral law. St. Thomas gives a simple
definition: natural law is the rational creature's participation in the divine law (S. Theol., I-II, 91, 2). The divine law for excellence is the eternal law of God which reigns over the entire universe. It is the plan of divine wisdom which is given promulgation in time by creation and revelation. The natural moral law corresponds primarily to beings are subject to the eternal law.

The eternal law is a law of being. This natural inclination or participation in the divine reality can be found in this world of man and to place himself in the service of the given data of his given nature as he can never tell us what man has been and the nature of man himself.

Therefore, when Catholic theology speaks of those demands of the natural moral law which are always and universally valid, it is speaking of the self-evident laws of one's own created nature. All other more precise and concrete moral dictates come from the application and interpretation of these

2. The natural moral law is also a formulated law, but in a secondary and derived sense. We could not even speak of a natural moral law of man unless we acknowledge that it is possible to derive specific obligations and to formulate them as universally valid on the basis of a rational insight into certain ultimate ontological structures valid for all men. Obviously the validity of any such precepts of the natural moral law depends entirely on whether and to what extent general structures of human existence can be known and verified. It is precisely here that we are faced with many perplexing questions nowadays. What is the meaning of man? Can this meaning be defined once and for all? Are the mere and obvious animality and rationality of man adequate expressions of his meaning? Does not man himself undergo significant changes in the course of history? For that matter, does man not undergo some important changes in his individual lifetime? And is not our knowledge of man itself conditioned by historical process and cultural presuppositions? Do we ever have a grasp on absolute truth, even in a few basic human matters, or is it not always a question of perspectives of the knowledge of truth? These questions cannot be easily brushed aside.

A knowledge of the meaning of man cannot adequately be acquired through the empirical method, because no matter how carefully empirical data may be gathered, it never gets beyond the realm of pure fact. It does not attain to the knowledge of essences. The social scientist or anthropologist may be able to tell us what man has always considered just or unjust, but he can never tell us what must be considered just, based on the nature of man himself.

Because we are looking for what must be considered good based on the nature of man himself, we are looking for an a priori law governing human nature and man's conduct. For this, philosophical reflection is indispensable - a deduction on the very meaning of man and the essential categories of his being resulting from a rational penetration of what is true on the empirical, factual level. According to St. Thomas, the moral imperatives which are known from the basic structures of human nature are self-evident "first principles." It cannot be demonstrated that the good is (naturally) to be done and sought after and the evil is to be avoided. But if one does not accept this first principle and such other principles which self-evidently embody it (the good of preserving life, of the brotherhood of all men, of man's dependence on God), then one fails to understand one's own nature. In fact, man implicitly affirms them even in differing them, for their very denial involves their use.
basion principles — an application and interpretation which is historically conditioned and which, in many cases, must be somewhat tentative. This means that our most certain principles are necessarily very general and rather abstract. They are nonetheless obligatory, but they can specify concrete moral demands only in a general way and after a thorough scrutiny of contemporary ways of thinking about the various activities of man.

For instance, it is clear that man has a natural inclination to self-preservation, but man's God-endowed provident reason only gives rise to a very general moral dictate on this score: that there is a moral duty to see to it that life is respected and preserved. It is a further step, requiring more data and more possibly inadequate distinctions, to formulate a negative absolute precept such as "thou shalt not kill" or "thou shalt not commit suicide" and apply them (by way of interpretation) to all imaginable kinds of lethal activity.

Traditional Catholic moral theology has always made exceptions to these norms, and we are not completely satisfied with all these exceptions today (e.g. capital punishment).

Another example is to be found in the sexual, procreative life of man. It is more self-evident to deduce that "sexuality demands some form of regulation," but if one is to deduce "thou shalt not practice birth control," this must result from an accurate knowledge of not only the biological processes, but the psychology and sociology of sexual behavior as well. If one is content to deduce the dominant moral obligation only from natural biological processes, and then relies only on thirteenth century biology which did not know, for instance, that woman produces germ cells, one will arrive at a historically conditioned conclusion which subsequent discoveries can render woefully inadequate.

Even so basic a natural law norm as "thou shalt not lie" is obviously subject to constant re-assessment and re-formulation as human interdependence and human communications change. In each of these cases there is an unchanging, morally obliging principle which, however, depends on a progressing knowledge of the changing human condition in order to find (obliging) expression in a more particularized concrete norm which will be applicable to (having truthfully arisen from) definite historical situations.

The three quite general examples of natural moral laws just given (self-preservation, procreation, truthfulness) which are easily discovered by an elemental reflection on the structure of man's existence, are also exam:es of the multi-leveled analysis of the "human construct" advocated by Aquinas. He said that "the (concrete) good" is known from those things to which man has a natural inclination and which are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit (the contraries would be evil and objects to be avoided). The precepts of natural law, then, correspond to natural inclinations on three different levels of man: man as substance, man as animal and man as rational (S. Theol. I-II 94.2).

Today's philosophical outlook, however, would see man more as a total unity. The contemporary notion of "person" is having a strong effect on natural law theory. Personality (we are not speaking of some superficial sentimentality or merely existential attitude) sees man not only as a subsisting substance, as passively experiencing vegetable and animal functions, and as thinking; but as a loving, valuing and acting person who essentially transcends the mere thing. This personalist understanding of the meaning of man considers the person's "substantial essence" to be important, but above all its perfection through which alone it is complete. This self-perfection is achieved "by nature" through the personal relations of dialogical existence. Thus the individual not only becomes truly a person through personal reciprocity (love), but is led to a personal God through other finite persons. There is a more decisive compenentation of the various aspects of human existence at a level prior to and embracing the functions of all of man's faculties.

It can now be said that man's "inclination" to be more fully a person is the most radical sign of "the good" in man, and this tendency penetrates and gives new meaning to every "level" of human existence. Interpersonal principles are now an integral (though still emerging) component of natural law theory, because there has appeared in the past 20 or 30 years a more carefully established ontology of inter-subjectivity. Hence natural law theory is no longer a stranger to the truly "personal" in man; it is seeking to become more interpersonally oriented. It can be said, in summary, that the natural moral law has as its most radical "precept" the obligation of man to personal growth in authentic human self-realization: all other "precepts" can be subsumed under this heading.

The concrete commands of the natural moral law must take as their starting-point, then, not man in the abstract, but man in the concrete. The search for the moral law of man is not completed, because the meaning of personal and historical man has not been frozen. New truths become apparent when man is viewed more in a total personal dimension. New truths of the natural law emerge in an industrial period which were not true in an agrarian era. Furthermore, man as evolutionary seems to experience thresholds of dramatic modifications of his situation or disposition, and this calls for a renewed analysis of the "ought" of the human condition, in the light of the universally valid, largely unformulated natural moral law (as illuminated by the faith of the Gospel of love).

These observations on the natural law have, by necessity, been brief and limited. There are many other aspects of the use of a natural law theory which would have to be treated elsewhere, among them: the relationship of the natural law to the Gospel law of love, and the role of the Church's magisterium in assisting mankind to arrive at an ever more certain self-understanding of its natural moral law. But these introductory comments on a natural law theory, partial as they may be, should hopefully find some acceptance among psychologists, psychiatrists and medical men generally, for these specialists also begin with an end aid to the concrete man in the here-and-now world, they frequently recognize within individual men the transcendental (universal) dictates of the natural and radical good of man, and they are apt to consider authentic self-realization, or total personal growth (physical, psychological, social, moral and spiritual), as the law of man. In removing the obstacles to actively assisting this growth to human self-fulfillment, these specialists are making man free to participate in the divine law by making it possible for him to fulfill the innermost nature of his being — the natural and radical striving toward the good, ultimately the Absolute Good.