

The Necessity of Law and Right Order

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said...(Gen. 1:1f).

The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. The Lord God gave man this order: “You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die.” (Gen.2: 15-17)

The stories noted above remain familiar to anyone raised within a Christian tradition. In fact, these stories remain an integral part of Judaism and Islam as well. If these stories remain only familiar, we fall short of understanding the wisdom within them. They contain a fundamental understanding of the necessity of law and order within any society, including our Church. Let us examine these passages, other scriptures and some basic points of moral theology in an attempt to better understand the role of law and order in society and within our Church.

When discussing law and right order, moral theology distinguishes between two types of law in respect to its author: Divine Law, given by God, and Human Law, given by man. Divine Law can be distinguished as Eternal, Natural or Positive. Human law can be distinguished as Ecclesiastical or Secular. These can be further categorized in relation to what the law addresses, but this exceeds the purpose of this article.

Because the use of reason demands orderliness, law is a necessary consequence of the use of reason. To be reasonable protects truth and results in right order. To be unreasonable denies truth and results in chaos. Stated another way, law emanates from practical reason. Eternal law is that law which emanates from God’s eternal conscience and practical reason. It is the basis for all other laws. Natural law is an expression of Eternal law. It is given by God to creation, particularly to those creatures that enjoy free will and the use of reason. It is the law within each person that moves us to grace and gives inclination to salvation. Divine Positive law is that law expressly given by God in commandment. The Ten Commandments are an example.

Human law, both Ecclesiastical and Secular, are proper expressions of Divine law. We are created in the image and likeness of God. Just as God’s very existence emanates law and order, so does man tend toward orderliness. We are social creatures. Our laws are not eternal or infallible, but they are necessary for right order and conduct. Insofar as they respect Divine law in its various forms and expressions, Human law is good and protects truth. It protects us from sin and guides us to heaven’s glory. Insofar as it does not respect Divine law, it tends toward chaos and evil and does not protect right order. It leads to death. By necessity, as we grow in our understanding of Divine law and as situations that humanity encounters change, Human law requires reform and change.

St. Paul summarized the existence of laws as deriving from the existence of God when he wrote: “Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed, and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves.” (Rom. 13:1-2)

Orderliness is intrinsic to the nature of God. The existence of right order witnesses to the creative work and presence of God. He created the world in right order and gave it laws to govern its existence (Gen. 1-2:4). He created man to govern the earth. (Gen. 1:26-28) Because man rules over the created order, the created order is subject to the blessings and curses of man. St. Paul expressed this beautifully when he wrote: “For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself

would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.” (Rom. 8: 19-21)

In Genesis 2:15-25, two critical points concerning law and right order are revealed. First, law is not a result of sin. It is intrinsic to our nature. Even before sin, even before God completed the creation of man with the creation of woman, He demanded obedience or death from Adam. This one command gave expression to the divine nature God gave man when He entrusted Adam with free will. If Adam freely chose obedience to God, he would share in the fullness of revelation and glory. If he chose disobedience to the direct command from God, he would die. Secondly, laws must be passed from authority to those subject to authority. God gave Adam the order not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He did not repeat this command to Eve after her creation. It was Adam’s duty to teach this to her. (Gen. 2:15-25)

In the same way, God has given us revealed truth and granted lawful authority to the successors of the Apostles. They are bound both to teach and to expound on the revealed truths for the right order of society. They fulfill these obligations by their words and examples and by promulgating ecclesiastical laws that protect justice.

When Satan tempted Eve, he did so by attacking the one law God had given Adam. In the breaking of this law, sin and suffering entered the world. (Gen. 3) So began salvation history. So also was revealed two other principles concerning law and authority. First, authority is given to protect others. The laws given by authority are issued as a means of guidance and protection. Conversely, when human laws no longer guide and protect, when they no longer assist us to achieve heaven’s glory, those laws no longer bind. God gave Adam one command to protect his innocence and guide his freedom with responsible obedience. Adam was obligated to pass this on to Eve to protect her from sin.

Secondly, when one in authority disobeys, all under their authority suffer. The disobedience of Eve did not result in a curse to all men until Adam’s disobedience. Her disobedience drew him to sin, but his disobedience resulted in the futility suffered by creation even to this present day. As God promised, Adam chose to sin and the consequence was death, for him and for all others.

The highest fulfillment of all laws is love itself. As our Lord stated so eloquently to the question posed: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Mt. 22:36-40) Recognizing this truth, Paul wrote: “Do you wish to have no fear of authority? Then do what is good and you will receive approval from it, for it is a servant of God for your good. . . . Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” (Rom. 13:3-4, 8) St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians that those who are guided by the Spirit are not under the law. Rather, they have conquered their passions and the flesh. They have chosen virtuous living in obedience to God and their lives reflect the Fruits of the Spirit. They are not exempt from the law, but rather they fulfill the highest of laws—love for God and love for neighbor. They have crucified their passions and live not for themselves, but for the glory of God. Though not under the law, they fulfill the law because of their obedience to God. This is true freedom: to choose God in perfect obedience and act responsibly in all affairs for love of God and love of others.

The application of these points is critical for the right order of society. Those in authority must use their authority to serve. They must be slaves of justice and stewards of the Divine law. Most importantly, their actions and words must witness to the justice and truth demanded all men by God. The consequence of their disobedience to these obligations is chaos and sin. If they do not act justly, serve those entrusted to them and live as an example of truth, they will lead others astray and encourage sin. Grievous will be their judgment. (Mt. 18:6; I Cor. 8:10-13; Mt. 7:15; Lk. 17:1)

The tremendous gift of freedom God gave us demands responsibility and proper use. To foster such responsibility requires right order and conduct and has required this even before sin. Sin entered the world because of disobedience to a command of God. Death entered the world because of lawlessness. When the only law God gave Adam was struck down, death became the consequence for us all. As attested throughout scripture and remaining the same today, we must choose to follow the Lord and all His commands and so live, or forsake Him in disobedience to His commands and die in sin. In short, we are known by the acts we perform. If we live in chaos and darkness, our father is Satan; if we live in right order and obedience to God's laws, we will share heaven's glory as sons of God. (Lk. 6:45; Jn.8: 34-51)

Because the right use of laws and right order in society protect us from sin and encourage the grace of salvation, those in authority must use their authority wisely. Particularly in the Church, ecclesiastical laws can be a great blessing to the faithful if promulgated and enforced in a spirit of love and service. When authorities in the Church abuse their God given authority by ignoring the true needs of their people or closing their minds to the voice of God, their authority and laws become burdensome and lead to dissent and chaos. Several times after the Israelites left Sinai, certain men rose up to take the lead of the people and led them to sin. They did not doubt the law given on Sinai, they did not disbelieve the power of God. They were simply selfish and proud men with care more for themselves than for the People of God. For this reason they and those that followed them perished at the hands of God. (Num. 14:1-38, 16)

It is not enough to have proper and good authority and laws, it is necessary as well that we follow them. Without laws to guide us, we are susceptible to our own imaginations and passions. As is evident in our world, one person's imagination and desires differ greatly from another's, thus causing chaos and conflict. Laws that govern proper living and regulate human affairs protect against chaos and conflict, thus protecting us from sin and death. If we are disobedient to the laws of justice, we could tempt our superiors to sin and fall prey to the curse of Adam. If we remain obedient for love of God and love of neighbor, we receive the fruits of the Tree of Life, Who is Christ Himself.

In conclusion, it would do us well to pray for those in authority. It is a well-known fact that those in authority are not free from sin. In both civil and ecclesiastical societies, some leaders live in corruption and violate the laws of God. Many laws they establish do not promote the Divine laws by which we were created. Within the Church, some in authority pay lip service to canon law and promote dissent by their own actions and attitudes. When decisions are made without proper consideration of the people they serve, they violate the necessary respect due each person. In short, lawful authority loses credibility in the absence of love and without witness to a desire for service of others. We have all witnessed this. Some of us have experienced it. Likewise, we lose credibility when we wrongfully disobey lawful authority. Mother Church recognizes the right to question lawful authority and decisions made (cf. Canon 221 of the *Code of Canon Law* and Canon 24 of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*). If we follow the laws of the Church, we remain obedient to lawful authority and protect our conscience. Just as Adam's fall led to the demise of all men, so does the fall of lawful authority lead to the demise of the people served. Let us pray for those in authority, that they will lead us to salvation by example and word. Let us pray for each other, that we might remain obedient servants of God. In this way, may we live in peace.

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