

***Veritatis Splendor* and natural law: from first principles to moral absolutes**

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Toward the close of his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II, in reminding his brother bishops of his and their responsibilities as pastors, identifies the «teaching which represents the central theme of this Encyclical», the teaching «being restated with the authority of the Successor of Peter». This is the teaching that reaffirms «*the universality and immutability of the moral commandments*, particularly those which prohibit always and without exception *intrinsically evil acts*» (n. 115).

Pope John Paul II, in continuity with the Catholic theological tradition, roots this teaching in the requirements of the natural law, particularly as understood by St. Thomas, to whose thought the Holy Father frequently appeals in reaffirming and developing the natural law tradition.

Here I propose to do the following. First (1), I will offer a summary of the understanding of natural law set forth by the Holy Father in *Veritatis Splendor*. In particular, I will show that, according to John Paul II, the *moral absolutes*—the «universal and immutable moral commandments» referred to in the passage cited above—proscribing *intrinsically evil acts* are, indeed, precepts of natural law, known

to be true in light of the primordial moral requirement of the natural law. The Holy Father emphasizes that these precepts protect the inviolable dignity of human persons, beings whom we are to love, by protecting the goods perfective of them. He further teaches that the truth of these natural law requirements is definitively revealed by the Crucified Christ, whose grace enables human persons to shape their choices and lives in conformity with them.

Second (2), I will examine the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on natural law, paying particular attention to the relationship between the «first and common precepts of natural law» and the «proximate conclusions» *derived* from them, namely, the precepts of the Decalogue, which are, according to St. Thomas (and to Pope John Paul II), *moral absolutes*. Finally (3), I will offer some reflections on the «movement» from the «first and common precepts of natural law» to its «proximate conclusions».

I. THE TEACHING OF *VERITATIS SPLENDOR* ON NATURAL LAW

Pope John Paul II affirms, with Vatican Council II,¹ that the highest norm of human action is God's divine law: eternal, objective and universal, whereby he governs the entire universe and the ways of the human community according to a plan conceived in wisdom and in love (cfr. *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 43, explicitly citing this conciliar passage). He emphasizes that "natural law" is our intelligent participation in God's eternal law (cfr. *ibid.*, nn. 12, 40). Moreover, with St. Thomas, whom he cites extensively, particularly on this point (cfr. his citation from *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 91, art. 2, in n. 42), he stresses that the natural law, inasmuch as it is the participation of *intelligent, rational* creatures in God's eternal law, is properly a *human law*. Thus he says, «this law is called the natural law... not because it refers to the nature of nonrational beings but because the reason which promulgates it is proper to human nature» (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 42). The moral or natural law, John Paul II affirms, «has its origin in God and always finds its source in him». Nonetheless, «by virtue of natural reason, which derives from divine wisdom», the natural law must also be recognized as «a properly human law» (*ibid.*, n. 40).

Moreover, precisely because the natural law finds its origin in God's divine and eternal law, its normative requirements are *truths* meant to help us choose rightly. In fact, John Paul II speaks of our moral life as a «*theonomy*, or *participated theonomy*,

¹ See Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3: «Quae clarius adhuc patent consideranti *supremam humanae vitae normam esse ipsam legem divinam, aeternam, obiectivam atque universalem, qua Deus consilio sapientiae et dilectionis suae mundum universum viasque communitatis humanae ordinat, dirigit, gubernat*» (emphasis added).

since man's free obedience to God's law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God's wisdom and providence. By forbidding man to "eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", God makes it clear that man does not originally possess such "knowledge" as something properly his own, but only participates in it by the light of the natural reason and of Divine Revelation, which manifests to him the requirements and promptings of eternal wisdom. Law must therefore be considered an expression of divine wisdom: by submitting to the law, freedom submits to the truth of creation» (*ibid.*, n. 41).

The Holy Father takes up the normative requirements or truths of natural law in his presentation, in Chapter One of the Encyclical, of the essential link between obedience to the Ten Commandments, which the Catholic tradition has always recognized as requirements of natural law, and eternal life. In his presentation of this essential link John Paul II makes it clear that the primordial moral requirement of natural law is the twofold love of God and of neighbor and that the precepts of the second tablet of the Decalogue are based on the truth that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. This, as will be seen more clearly later, is of paramount importance.

He begins by noting that our Lord, in responding to the question posed to him by the rich young man, «Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?» (*Mt* 19:16), makes it clear that its answer can be found «only by turning one's mind and heart to the "One" who is good... *Only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself*» (n. 9; cfr. nn. 11, 12). He continues by saying, «God has already given an answer to this question: he did so *by creating man and ordering him* with wisdom and love to his final end, through the law which is inscribed in his heart (cfr. *Rm* 2:15), the "natural law"... He also did so *in the history of Israel*, particularly in the "ten words", the *commandments of Sinai*» (n. 12). John Paul II next reminds us that our Lord then told the young man: «If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments» (*Mt* 19:17). John Paul II says that Jesus, by speaking in this way, makes clear «the close connection... *between eternal life and obedience to God's commandments* [which]... show man the path of life and lead to it» (n. 12). The first three of the commandments of the Decalogue call «us to acknowledge God as the one Lord of all and to worship him alone for his infinite holiness» (n. 11). But the young man, replying to Jesus' declaration that he must keep the commandments if he wishes to enter eternal life, demands to know «which ones» (*Mt* 18:19). John Paul II says, «he asks what he must do in life in order to show that he acknowledges God's holiness» (n. 13). In answering this question, Jesus reminds the young man of the Decalogue's precepts regarding our neighbor. «From the very lips of Jesus», the Holy Father observes, «man is once more given the commandments of the Decalogue» (n. 12). These Ten Commandments, John Paul II continues, are based on the commandment that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, a commandment expressing «*the singular dignity of the human person, "the only creature that God has wanted for its own sake"*» (n. 13, with an internal citation from *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24).

It is at this point that John Paul II develops a matter of crucial importance for understanding the truths of natural law and the relationship between the primordial moral command to love our neighbor as ourselves and the quite specific commandments of the second tablet of the Decalogue. His point is that we can love our neighbor and respect his dignity as a person only by cherishing the real goods perfective of him and by refusing to damage, destroy, or impede these goods. I will return to this matter when I review St. Thomas' teaching on natural law and in the final part of this essay.

Appealing to the words of Jesus, John Paul II emphasizes the truth that «the different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections on the one commandment about the good of the person, at the level of the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor, and with the material world... The commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man are meant to safeguard *the good* of the person, the image of God, by protecting his *goods*» (n. 13). He goes on to say that the negative precepts of the Decalogue—«You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness»—«express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage», and so on (n. 13). These negative precepts of the Decalogue, which protect the good of human persons by protecting the goods perfective of them, are among the universal and immutable moral absolutes proscribing intrinsically human acts, the teaching representing the “central theme” of the Encyclical, and on which John Paul II, as we shall see below, focuses attention in Chapter II of the Encyclical.

In Chapter One the Holy Father also emphasizes that natural law, whose specific normative requirements have also been revealed in the “ten words” given on Sinai and reaffirmed by the lips of Jesus himself, is ultimately fulfilled and perfected only as «*a gift of God*: the offer of a share in the divine Goodness revealed and communicated in Jesus» (n. 17).

As already noted, the Holy Father affirms that the negative precepts of the Decalogue, are *moral absolutes*, and that the human acts proscribed by them are *intrinsically evil acts*. It is therefore necessary, in order for us to understand properly the teaching on natural law set forth in *Veritatis Splendor*, to consider John Paul II's teaching on this crucially important matter, to which he devotes the fourth section of Chapter Two and a good part of Chapter Three. I will do so by examining his teaching on the following points: (1) the *moral specification of human acts*, (2) the *criteria for assessing their moral goodness or badness*, (3) the truth that moral absolutes, by excluding intrinsically evil acts, *protect the inviolable dignity of human persons and point the way to fulfillment in Christ*.

1. The Moral Specification of Human Acts

The Holy Father is explicitly concerned with this important issue in the fourth section of Chapter Two of *Veritatis Splendor*. After repudiating some contemporary

ethical theories, which he identifies as types of what he terms “teleologism”, because they are utterly inadequate philosophically and incompatible with Catholic faith (cfr. nn. 71-75), John Paul II emphasizes that «*the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the ‘object’ rationally chosen by the deliberate will*» (n. 78, with explicit reference to St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 18, art. 6). Then, in a very important passage well summarizing the Catholic tradition as expressed by St. Thomas, he writes as follows:

«In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behavior. To the extent that it is in conformity with the order of reason, it is the cause of the goodness of the will: it perfects us morally... By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world. Rather, that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person» (n. 78).

The “object” of a human act, in other words, is the subject matter with which it is concerned—it is the intelligible proposal that one can adopt by choice and execute externally. For example, the “object” of an act of adultery is having intercourse with some one who is not one’s spouse or with the spouse of another. This is *what* adultery is.

2. The Criteria for Assessing the Morality of Human Acts

With this understanding of the “object” of a human act in mind, it is not difficult to grasp the Holy Father’s argument, which he himself summarizes by saying: «Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature “incapable of being ordered” to God *because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image*” (n. 80, emphasis added).

I added emphasis to this passage from the Encyclical because it shows us that certain kinds of human acts, specified by the «object freely chosen and willed», are contrary to those precepts of natural law which prohibit acts which damage, destroy, or impede the goods perfective of human persons and in that way protect the “good” of the human person. As we saw above, John Paul II had emphasized that we can love our neighbor—the primordial moral requirement of natural law—only by cherishing and respecting the *good* of our neighbor, which we do by cherishing and respecting the *goods* perfective of him. This is the reason, as we have seen, why the precepts of the Decalogue are true requirements of natural law. As John Paul II says, «the commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man are meant to safeguard *the good* of the person, the image of God, by protecting his *goods*». Thus, the negative precepts of the Decalogue «express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage» and the like (n. 13).

In other words, intrinsically evil acts are acts specified by proposals ("objects") to damage, destroy, or impede the goods perfective of human persons. Such acts are absolutely excluded by negative precepts of natural law, moral absolutes admitting no exceptions. These precepts, moreover, do not say that it is wrong to act contrary to a virtue—e.g., to "kill *unjustly*", or "engage in *unchaste* intercourse". Rather, these precepts exclude, without exception, as John Paul II insists (cfr. nn. 52, 67, 76, 82), "specific", "concrete", "particular" *kinds of behavior* (cfr. nn. 49, 52, 70, 77, 79, 82) as specified by the object of human choice. Those kinds of behavior—e.g., doing something intentionally to bring about the death of an innocent person or engaging in sexual intercourse despite the fact that at least one of the parties is married—are excluded by the relevant negative moral precept without first being identified by their opposition to virtue.

As John Paul II explains, «negative moral precepts... prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behavior as intrinsically evil» (n. 67) protect the dignity of the person and are required by love of neighbor as oneself (nn. 13, 50-52, 67, 99). Intrinsically evil acts violate (cfr. n. 75) and «radically contradict» (n. 80) «the good of the person, at the level of the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor, and with the material world» (n. 13; cfr. nn. 78-80). It is impossible, the Holy Father says, to respect the good of persons without respecting the goods intrinsic to them, «the goods... indicated by the natural law as goods to be pursued» (n. 67), the «"personal goods"... safeguarded by the commandments, which, according to St. Thomas, contain the whole natural law» (n. 79, with a reference to *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 1; cfr. nn. 43, 72, 78). John Paul II emphasizes that «the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for fundamental goods», among which is bodily life (n. 48; cfr. n. 50).

In short, according to Pope John Paul II the precepts of the Decalogue are *moral absolutes* proscribing *intrinsically evil acts*. The *truth* of these moral absolutes is rooted in the primordial principle of natural law requiring us to love our neighbors—beings who, like ourselves, are *persons* made in the image of God and who, consequently, have an inviolable dignity. These moral absolutes, required by the love commandment, protect this dignity precisely by protecting the real *goods* perfective of human persons.

3. Moral Absolutes Protect the Inviolable Dignity of Human Persons and Point the Way toward Fulfillment in Christ

The great truth that absolute moral norms proscribing intrinsically evil acts are «valid always and for everyone, with no exception», is essentially related to the truth that human persons possess an inviolable dignity (n. 97). In fact, as John Paul II observes, these norms «represent the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy, which can

come into being and develop only on the basis of the equality of all its members, who possess common rights and duties. *When it is a matter of moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone*» (n. 96). To deny that there are intrinsically evil acts and moral absolutes excluding them logically leads to the surrendering of the inviolable rights of human persons, rights that must be recognized and protected if society is to be civilized.

The Holy Father recognizes «the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice... which fidelity to the moral order can demand» (n. 93). Nevertheless, he takes pains to point out that the discernment which the Church exercises regarding the “teleologisms” repudiated earlier in the Encyclical «is not limited to denouncing and refuting them» because they lead to a denial of moral absolutes and of intrinsically evil acts. Rather, in making this discernment the Church, in a positive way, «seeks, with great love, to help all the faithful to form a moral conscience which will make judgments and lead to decisions in accordance with the truth», ultimately with the truth revealed in Jesus (n. 85). For it is «*in the Crucified Christ that the Church finds the answer*» to the question as to why we must obey «universal and unchanging moral norms» (n. 85). These norms are absolutely binding precisely because they protect the inviolable dignity of human persons, whom we are to love with the love of Christ, a self-sacrificial love ready to suffer evil rather than do it.

John Paul II illustrates this great truth by appealing to the witness of martyrs. «The unacceptability of “teleological”, “consequentialist”, and “proportionalist” ethical theories, which deny the existence of negative moral norms regarding specific kinds of behavior, norms which are valid without exception, is confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom» (n. 90). He continues by saying: «martyrdom, accepted as an affirmation of the inviolability of the moral order, bears splendid witness both to the holiness of God’s law and to the inviolability of the personal dignity of man, created in God’s image and likeness» (n. 92). Indeed, «martyrdom rejects as false and illusory whatever “human meaning” one might claim to attribute, even in “exceptional” conditions, to an act morally evil in itself. Indeed, it even more clearly unmasks the true face of such an act: *it is a violation of man’s “humanity”* in the one perpetrating it even before the one enduring it» (n. 92, with explicit reference to *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 27).

Absolute moral norms proscribing always and everywhere acts intrinsically evil by reason of the object of moral choice point the way to fulfillment in Christ, the Crucified One, who «fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father’s love» (n. 2, with a citation from *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22). «*The Crucified Christ*»—who gives to us the final answer why we must, if we are to be fully the beings God wants us to be, forbear doing the evil prohibited by absolute moral norms—«*reveals the authentic meaning of freedom: he lives it fully in the total gift of himself* and calls his disciples to share in his freedom» (n. 85). In a singularly important passage the Holy Father then writes: «Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift,

one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly. It is an essential part of that creaturely image which is the basis of the dignity of the person. Within that freedom there is an echo of the primordial vocation whereby the Creator calls man to the true Good, and even more, through Christ's Revelation, to become his friend and to share his own divine life. It is at once inalienable self-possession and openness to all that exists, in passing beyond self to knowledge and love of the other (cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24). Freedom is then rooted in the truth about man, and it is ultimately directed towards communion» (n. 86).

As Jesus reveals to us, «freedom is acquired in *love*, that is, in the *gift of self*... the gift of self *in service to God and one's brethren*» (n. 87). This is the ultimate truth meant to guide free choices: to love, even as we have been and are loved by God in Christ, whose «crucified flesh fully reveals the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth, just as his Resurrection from the dead is the supreme exaltation of the fruitfulness and saving power of a freedom lived out in truth» (n. 87).

Moreover, in our struggle to live worthily as beings made in God's image and called to communion with him—in our endeavor to shape our choices and actions in accord with the truths of natural law—we are not alone. We can live as God wills us to because he is ever ready to help us with his grace: the natural law is fulfilled, perfected, completed by the law of grace. As the Holy Father reminds us, God never commands the impossible: «Temptations can be overcome, sins can be avoided, because together with the commandments the Lord gives us the possibility of keeping them» (n. 102). This truth, John Paul II points out, is a matter of Catholic faith. The Council of Trent solemnly condemned the claim «that the commandments of God are impossible of observance by the one who is justified. For God does not command the impossible, but in commanding he admonishes you to do what you can and to pray for what you cannot, and he gives his aid to enable you» (n. 102, citing from the Council of Trent, Session VI, Decree on Justification *Cum hoc tempore*, ch. 2; *DS* 1536; cfr. Canon 18, *DS* 1568).

II. THE TEACHING OF ST. THOMAS ON NATURAL LAW

Here I do not intend to present St. Thomas's thought on this subject in any depth—a task impossible for a brief essay and one, moreover, that has been undertaken by many competent scholars.² Rather, I will briefly summarize the thought of St. Thomas on (1) the relationship between natural law and eternal law; (2) natural law as a work of human reason; (3) the different “levels” or “grades” of natural law. Here I will not consider what St. Thomas teaches about the law of grace

² I have previously endeavored to present St. Thomas's teaching on natural law in greater detail. See

as fulfilling the natural law, but will rather then (4) focus attention on the "movement" from the first and common precepts of natural law to their "proximate conclusions", among which are the precepts of the Decalogue, which Thomas regards as moral absolutes.

1. *Eternal Law and Natural Law*

Thomas taught that all creation—the cosmos and all things within it—is under the governance of God's intelligence. Thus the eternal law is the *ratio* or divine plan of the governance of all things insofar as this *ratio* or divine plan exists within the mind of God himself as the ruler of the universe.³ The eternal law directs the entire created universe and the activity of all created things, including human persons. Eternal law is thus the «*ratio* of the divine wisdom insofar as it is directive of all acts and movements».⁴ The end toward which the eternal law directs all creatures is the universal common good of the entire universe, and it is promulgated along with creation.⁵

Although all creatures «participate» in the eternal law, they do so differently, in accord with their natures. All created beings, whether irrational or rational, participate in the eternal law purely passively insofar as from it they receive an «impression» whereby «they have inclinations toward their proper acts and ends».⁶ The eternal law

my «The Meaning and Nature of the Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas», *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 22 (1977) 168-189; «The Natural Law and Objective Morality: A Thomistic Perspective», in *Principles of Catholic Moral Life*, ed. William E. May (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980), pp. 151-190; *An Introduction to Moral Theology* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1991), pp. 37-54. See also R. A. Armstrong, *Primary and Secondary Precepts in Thomistic Natural Law Teaching* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); M. B. Crowe, *The Changing Profile of the Natural Law* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), pp. 136-192; Walter Farrell, O.P., *The Natural Moral Law According to St. Thomas and Suarez* (Dichtling: St. Dominic's Press, 1930); Odon Lottin, O.S.B., *Le droit naturel chez Saint Thomas d'Aquin et ses predecesseurs* (Bruges: Beyaert, 1931); O. Lottin, «La valeur des formules de saint Thomas d'Aquin concernant la loi naturelle», *Melanges Joseph Marechal* (Bruxelles: L'Édition Universelle, 1950), pp. 346-377; D. O'Donoghue, «The Thomist Concept of Natural Law», *Irish Theological Quarterly* 22 (1955) 89-109; Paul Overbeke, O.P., «La loi naturelle et le droit naturel selon S. Thomas», *Revue Thomiste* 57 (1957) 53-78, 450-495.

³ *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 91, art. 1: «nihil est aliud lex quam quoddam dictamen practicae rationis in principe qui gubernat aliquam communitatem perfectam. Manifestum est autem... quod tota communitas universi gubernatur ratione divina. Et ideo ipsa ratio gubernationis rerum in Deo sicut in principe universitatis existens, legis habet rationem».

⁴ *Ibid.*, q. 93, art. 1: «Lex aeterna nihil aliud est quam ratio divinae sapientiae, secundum quod est directiva omnium actuum et motionum».

⁵ *Ibid.*, q. 91, art. 1, ad 1 and ad 2; q. 93, art. 1, ad 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, q. 91, art. 2: «lex, cum sit regula et mensura, dupliciter potest esse in aliquo... alio modo, sicut in regulato et mensurato, quia in quantum participat aliquid in regula vel mensura, sic regulatur et mensuratur. Unde cum omnia quae divinae providentiae subduntur, a lege aeterna reguntur et mensurentur... manifestum est quod omnia participant aliquantulum legem divinam, in quantum scilicet ex impressione eius habent inclinationes in proprios actus et fines».

is “in” them inasmuch as they are ruled and measured by it. But because human persons are intelligent and rational creatures, they participate in the eternal law not only passively, by being ruled and measured by it, but *actively*, and their active, intelligent participation in the eternal law is precisely what natural law is.⁷ As we have seen, this is precisely the teaching of Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*.

2. Natural Law as a Work of Human Reason

In *Veritatis Splendor*, as we have seen, John Paul II takes care to note that the natural law, precisely because it is the participation of intelligent, rational creatures in God’s eternal law, is properly a *human* law: «this law is called the natural law... not because it refers to the nature of irrational beings but because the reason which promulgates it is proper to human nature» (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 42). It is, he says, «a properly human law» (n. 40).

In affirming this the Holy Father is reaffirming a central feature of St. Thomas’s understanding of natural law. Contrasting the different ways in which nonrational and rational creatures participate in God’s eternal law, Aquinas says: «Even nonrational animals participate in God’s eternal *ratio* in their own way, just as does the rational creature. But because the rational creature participates in it by intelligence and reason (*intellectualiter et rationaliter*), therefore the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is *properly* called law: for law is something pertaining to reason... But in the nonrational creature it is not participated in rationally; hence it cannot be said to be law [in the nonrational creature] except by way of a similitude».⁸

I believe that D. O’Donoghue expresses this important aspect of St. Thomas’s teaching on natural law quite accurately. He notes that «there are two ways of understanding rational participation [in the eternal law]», and he goes on to write: «We might see it as a *receptive* participation: created reason is receptive of Eternal Law just as irrational nature is... though in a higher way... Or we might see rational

⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 91, art. 2: «Inter cetera autem rationalis creatura excellentiori quodammodo divinae providentiae subiacet, inquantum et ipsa fit providentiae particeps, sibi ipsi et aliis providens. Unde et in ipsa participatur ratio aeterna, per quam habet naturalem inclinationem ad debitum actum et finem. Et talis participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura lex naturalis dicitur. Unde cum Psalmista dixisset (*Ps* 4,6), “Sacrificate sacrificium iustitiae”, quasi quibusdam quaerentibus quae sunt iustitiae opera, subiungit: “Multi dicunt: Quid ostendit nobis bona?” cui quaestioni respondens, dicit: “Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine”, quasi lumen rationis naturalis, quo discernimus quid sit bonum et malum, quod pertinet ad naturalem legem, nihil aliud sit quam impressio divini luminis in nobis. Unde patet quod lex naturalis nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura».

⁸ *Ibid.*, q. 91, art. 1, ad 3: «etiam animalia irrationalia participant rationem aeternam uno modo, sicut et rationalis creatura. Sed quia rationalis creatura participat eam intellectualiter et rationaliter, ideo participatio legis aeternae in creatura rationali proprie lex vocatur: nam lex est aliquid rationis... In creatura autem irrationali non participatur rationaliter, unde non potest dici lex nisi per similitudinem».

participation as *legislative*, as participation in the very activity of legislating... That we must understand rational participation in the second sense, seeing human reason as regulative rather than regulated, is clear from the fact that St. Thomas identifies the Natural Law with the "propositions" or "precepts" of natural reason... The matter is put beyond all doubt by the discussion in q. 93, art. 6, where a sharp distinction is drawn between participation in Eternal Law by way of *inclinatio naturalis ad id quod est consonum legi aeternae* and *ipsa naturalis cognitio boni*... That which differentiates Natural Law from natural inclination, and makes it law in the proper sense, is the fact that it is the work of reason, expression rather than impression. It comes from God, as all human things... but the mind receives it, not as itself an object which is revealed by it, but as becoming a source of light, discerning and declaring the truth for human activity (cfr. *Ia-IIae*, q. 91, art. 2)).⁹

St. Thomas clarifies the way that the eternal law is "in" the rational creature when he considers the position, held by many of his medieval predecessors, that the natural law is a power or a habit, in particular, the habit of synderesis.¹⁰ Thomas acknowledges that natural law may, in a *secondary* and derived sense, be regarded as a habit insofar as the judgments of practical reason that together go to constitute it are habitually kept in mind. But in the *proper* sense natural law is *not* a habit, nor is it a power. Rather, it is a reality brought into being (*constitutum*) through reason; it is a work of human intelligence as ordered to action or of *ratio practica*, just as a proposition of the speculative reason (*ratio speculativa*) is an achievement of human intelligence as ordered to knowing for the sake of knowing. Natural law, therefore, is something that we ourselves naturally bring into being by the spontaneous exercise of our practical reason. It is something that we bring into being by our own *doing*, what Thomas calls a *quod quis agit*, not something enabling us to bring something into being by our own doing, what he calls a *quo quis agit*. Thus in the very first article in the *Summa theologiae* explicitly devoted to natural law, St. Thomas says: «something can be said to be a habit in two ways. First, properly and essentially; and thus natural law is *not* a habit. For it has been said above [cfr. q. 90, art. 1, ad 2] that natural law is something brought into being (*constitutum*) through reason, just as a proposition is a certain kind of work of reason... For what one does (*quod quis agit*) and that whereby one does something (*quo quis agit*) are not the same... Therefore, since a habit is that whereby one does something it cannot be that any law is a habit properly and essentially. But in another way whatever is possessed

⁹ D. O'Donoghue, «The Thomist Concept of the Natural Law», *Irish Theological Quarterly* 22 (1955) 93-94. On this also see Martin Rhonheimer, *Natur als Grundlage der Moral: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit autonomer und teleologischer Ethik* (Innsbruck and Vienna: Tyrolia Verlag, 1987), pp. 67-74.

¹⁰ On the views of Thomas's predecessors regarding the relationship between synderesis and natural law, see M.B. Crowe, *The Changing Profile of the Natural Law*, pp. 111-135. See also Crowe, «The Term *Synderesis* and the Scholastics: St. Thomas and *Synderesis*», *Irish Theological Quarterly* 23 (1956) 228-245.

habitually can be called a habit (*potest dici habitus id quod habitu tenetur*)... And in this way, because the precepts of natural law are sometimes actually considered by reason and at times are only habitually within it, thus in this way natural law can be said to be a habit».¹¹

As such, then, and properly, for St. Thomas natural law *is an achievement or work of practical reason*. Indeed, it can rightly be said to consist in an ordered set of *true propositions of practical reason about what is to be done*. This leads us to consider St. Thomas's thought on the different "grades" or "levels" of natural law precepts. Of particular importance for this essay is the relationship between the first and second "grades" of natural law precepts.

3. The "Grades" of Natural Law Precepts: "Primary Precepts", Precepts "Close to" Primary Precepts, and Other Precepts of Natural Law

According to St. Thomas there are distinct "levels" or "grades" of natural law precepts. He makes this clear when he shows that *all* of the moral precepts of the Old Law belong to the natural law, and he does so in a most interesting text. It reads as follows:

«The moral precepts [of the Old Law]... are about those things which of themselves pertain to good morals. But since human morals are called such because of their order to reason, which is the proper principle of human actions, those morals are called good which are in agreement with reason, and those are called bad which are not in agreement with reason. But just as every judgment of the speculative reason proceeds from the natural knowledge of first principles, so also *every judgment of practical reason proceeds from some naturally known principles*, as was said above [q. 94, art. 2, ad 4]. It is possible to proceed in different ways from these [naturally known principles] in order to judge about different matters. For some matters in human actions are so plain that they can immediately, with little consideration, be approved or disapproved in the light of *those common and first principles*. But there are other matters whose judgment requires much consideration of different circumstances; to consider these diligently is not the task of just anyone, but only of the wise... And there are indeed other matters for whose judgment man needs to be helped by divine instruction, such as matters concerning things that must be believed.

¹¹ *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 1: «aliquid potest dici esse habitus dupliciter. Uno modo, proprie et essentialiter: et sic lex naturalis non est habitus. Dictum est enim supra quod lex naturalis est aliquid per rationem constitutum: sicut etiam propositio est quoddam opus rationis. Non est autem idem quod quis agit, et quo quis agit... Cum igitur habitus sit quo quis agit, non potest esse quod lex aliqua sit habitus proprie et essentialiter. Alio modo potest dici habitus id quod habitur tenetur... Et hoc modo, quia praecepta legis naturalis quandoque considerantur in actu a ratione, quandoque autem sunt in ea habitualiter tantum, secundum hunc modum potest dici lex naturalis sit habitus».

Thus, since moral precepts are concerned with things which pertain to good morals—which are those things which are in agreement with reason—it is clear that every judgment of human reason derives in some way from natural reason. It is thus necessary that *all moral precepts belong to natural law*, but in different ways. For there are some matters which the natural reason of any man immediately and of itself judges must be done or not done, such as, *Honor your father and mother*, and *Thou shalt not kill*, *Thou shalt not steal*. And matters of this kind belong absolutely to natural law. But there are other matters which are judged by the wise in the light of more careful consideration as matters that must be observed. These too belong to natural law, but nonetheless they require the discipline by which lesser ones are to be instructed by the wise, such as, *rise up before the hoary head*, and *honor the person of the aged man*, and others of this kind. There are still other matters for whose judgment human reason stands in need of divine instruction, through which we are enlightened about divine things, such as, *Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing nor any likeness; Thou shalt not take the name of thy God in vain*.¹²

Here I am not concerned with moral precepts of the third and fourth category or “level” indicated in this text. The fourth category, in fact, which concerns precepts of the Decalogue dealing with man’s relationship to God, is somewhat unusual. Presumably, as one commentator has noted, in writing this text Thomas «has in mind the *de facto* situation of the Israelites, and their need to be withdrawn from idolatry, etc. We know that others, notably Greek philosophers, arrived at the same conclusion without the assistance of revelation».¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 1: «Dicendum quod praecepta moralia... sunt de illis quae secundum se ad bonos mores pertinent. Cum autem humani mores dicantur in ordine ad rationem, quae est proprium principium humanorum actuum, illi mores dicuntur boni qui rationi congruunt, mali autem qui a ratione discordant. Sicut autem omne iudicium rationis speculativae procedit a naturali cognitione primorum principiorum, ita etiam omne iudicium rationis practicae procedit ex quibusdam principiis naturaliter cognitis, ut supra dictum est. Ex quibus diversimode procedi potest ad iudicandum de diversis. Quaedam enim sunt in humanis actibus adeo explicita quod statim, cum modica consideratione, possunt approbari vel reprobari per illa communia et prima principia. Quaedam vero sunt ad quorum iudicium requiritur multa consideratio diversarum circumstantiarum, quas considerare diligenter non est cuiuslibet, sed sapientum... Quaedam vero sunt ad quae diiudicanda indiget homo adiuvari per instructionem divinam: sicut est circa credenda. Sic igitur patet quod, cum moralia praecepta sunt de his quae pertinent ad bonos mores, haec autem sunt quae rationi congruunt, omne autem rationis humanae iudicium aliquantulum a naturali ratione derivatur, necesse est quod omnia praecepta moralia pertineant ad legem naturae, sed diversimode. Quaedam enim sunt quae statim per se ratio naturalis cuiuslibet hominis diiudicat esse facienda vel non facienda: sicut, *Honora patrem tuum et matrem tuam*, et *Non occides*, *Non furtum facies*. Et huiusmodi sunt absolute de lege naturae. Quaedam vero sunt quae subtiliori consideratione rationis a sapientibus iudicantur esse observanda. Et ista sic sunt de lege naturae, ut tamen indigeant disciplina, qua minores a sapientioribus instruantur: sicut illud, *Coram cano capite consurge*, et *honora personam senis*, et alia huiusmodi. Quaedam vero sunt ad quae iudicanda ratio humana indiget instructione divina, per quam erudimur de divinis: sicut est illud, *Non facies tibi sculptile neque omnem similitudinem; Non assumes nomen Dei tui in vanum*».

¹³ David Bourke and Arthur Littledale, in their editorial note d to art. 1 of q. 100 of the *Summa theologiae*, in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Vol. 29, *The Old Law (Ia-IIae, qq. 98-105)* (London: Blackfriars, 1969), p. 60, note d.

The teaching set forth in this text is central to St. Thomas's understanding of the precepts of the Decalogue, which he everywhere considers to be *conclusions of practical reason "close to" or "proximate to" the first principles of natural law*. Thus he writes: «Those precepts pertain to the Decalogue whose knowledge man has in himself from God. These are of such a kind that they can be immediately known from first and common principles with but little reflection, and, in addition, those known immediately from divinely infused faith. Thus among the precepts of the Decalogue [known immediately in the light of first and common principles] two kinds of precepts are not counted. Those, namely, which are first and common, of which there is no need of further "edition", inasmuch as they are written in natural reason, as it were self-evidently known, such as that one should do evil to no one; and also those that are discovered to be fitting to reason through diligent inquiry of the wise: for these come from God to the people by means of the discipline of the wise. Yet both of these kinds of precepts are contained in the precepts of the Decalogue, but differently. For those which are first and common are contained [in the Decalogue] as principles are contained in their proximate conclusions, while those that are known by the wise are, conversely, contained in them [the precepts of the Decalogue] as conclusions are found in their principles».¹⁴

These texts make quite clear the "structure" of natural law according to St. Thomas. For him it is an ordered set of true propositions about what is to be done, beginning (1) with the first and common principles of natural law, proceeding (2) to its proximate or immediate conclusions, the precepts found in the Decalogue—which, as he emphasizes, are moral absolutes admitting of no exceptions, so that even God cannot dispense from them¹⁵, and finally (3) natural law precepts whose truth needs to be shown by the "wise," only after careful consideration of many circumstances. But what are the "first and common principles" of natural law, and how are the precepts of the Decalogue derived from them? This is the issue to which I will now turn.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 3: «Illa ergo praecepta ad decalogum pertinent quorum notitiam homo habet per seipsum a Deo. Huiusmodi vero sunt illa quae statim ex principiis communibus primis cognosci possunt modica consideratione: et iterum illa quae statim ex fide divinitus infusa innotescunt. Inter praecepta ergo decalogi non computantur duo genera praeceptorum: illa scilicet quae sunt prima et communia, quorum non oportet aliam editionem esse nisi quod sunt scripta in ratione naturali quasi per se nota, sicut quod nulli debet homo malefacere, et alia huiusmodi; et iterum illa quae per diligentem inquisitionem sapientum inveniuntur rationi convenire, haec enim proveniunt a Deo ad populum mediante disciplina sapientum. Utraque tamen horum praeceptorum continentur in praeceptis decalogi, sed diversimode. Nam illa quae sunt prima et communia continentur in eis sicut principia in conclusionibus proximis; illa vero quae per sapientes cognoscuntur, continentur in eis, e converso, sicut conclusiones in principiis». See also *ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 11.

¹⁵ On this see *ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 8. A superb commentary on the permanence or absoluteness of the moral precepts of the Decalogue is given by Patrick Lee, «The Permanence of the Ten Commandments: St. Thomas and His Modern Commentators», *Theological Studies* 42 (1981) 422-443.

4. *The Movement from the “First and Common Principles” of Natural Law to Their “Proximate Conclusions”*

In the texts from *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 1 and art. 3 cited above (notes 12 and 14), St. Thomas refers to the «common and first principles» of natural law, to its «naturally known principles», which, he says in Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 1, had been discussed in an earlier article—and editors of the *Summa* uniformly refer readers to St. Thomas’s consideration of the «first precepts» of natural law to which Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2 is devoted. Consequently, here I want first (a) to summarize what St. Thomas teaches in Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2 regarding the «first and common principles» of natural law. I will then (b) call attention to other texts in which St. Thomas speaks of other «first and common principles» of natural law markedly different in nature from those identified in Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2. These other «first and common» principles, in fact, are identified by St. Thomas himself as the premises serving to show the truth of the precepts he identifies as the «proximate conclusions» comprising the second level or category of natural law precepts.

a. *Summa theologiae* Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2 and the first principles of natural law

Thomas begins this key article by drawing an important analogy between the “precepts” of natural law, which pertain to *ratio practica*, or reason as ordered to knowing for the sake of action, and the first principles of demonstration, which pertain to *ratio speculativa*, or reason as ordered to knowing for the sake of knowing.¹⁶ He says that just as *being* is the first thing that our intellect grasps with regard to its knowledge of reality, of what is, so *good* is what is first of all grasped by our reason as ordered to action. He then declares: «Therefore, the first principle in practical reason is that which is founded upon the meaning (*ratio*) of the good, which meaning is, *the good is that which all things desire*. Therefore, this is the *first precept* of [natural] law, namely, that *good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided*. And upon this [precept or “proposition” of practical reason] are based all other precepts of natural law: namely, that all those things-to-be-done or things-to-be-avoided, which practical reason naturally understands to be human goods [or evils], belong to precepts of natural law».¹⁷

¹⁶ Here it is essential to stress the role that practical reason plays for St. Thomas and the significance of the difference between speculative and practical reason. For St. Thomas there are *not* two distinct reasons in man, speculative and practical, but there *are* two basically different ways in which man exercises his power of reason or intellect. In speculative inquiry its concern is with *what is*. In practical deliberation its concern is with *what-is-to-be-done*. And in both realms of inquiry there are *nondemonstrable* starting points or principles. On this matter see M. Rhonheimer, *Natur als Grundlage der Moral*, pp. 42-62, and Germain Grisez, *Contraception and Natural Law* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1964), chapter 3, and the literature cited there.

¹⁷ *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2: «Sicut autem ens est primum quod cadit in apprehensione

Thomas then proceeds to identify some, but not all, of the “goods” to be done and pursued which practical reason “naturally” understands. He begins by saying that «reason naturally understands as goods, and consequently to be pursued in action, all those things to which man has a natural inclination, and things contrary to them as evils and to be avoided».¹⁸ In other words, we are dynamically oriented, by natural inclinations, to the *goods* perfective of our being as human persons. Thomas then distinguishes three levels of natural inclinations and the basic human goods to which they orient us and which practical reason immediately understands as goods to be pursued in action. At the first level is the good of being itself, to which we are inclined insofar as we are substances; since, however, the being of living substances is life itself, the relevant human good here is the good of life itself. At a second level, as beings who are animal in nature, we are naturally inclined to such goods as the union of man and woman, the education of children and the like. And at a third level, as rational beings, we are naturally inclined to such goods as knowledge of the truth about God, living in human society, etc.¹⁹

It is important to note that the “precepts” or “principles” of natural law are *not* the natural inclinations. Rather, the precepts or “principles” are the propositions, naturally understood as true, that goods such as life itself, the union of man and woman, the education of children, knowledge of the truth about God, living in human society and the like are goods to be pursued in action and their opposites are evils to be avoided.

It is also important to note that in this article St. Thomas makes no claim to be offering an exhaustive or taxative list of the human goods—the goods perfective of human persons—to which man is naturally inclined. Rather, he is offering an illustrative list of these goods. This is clearly shown by the fact that he uses such expressions as «and the like» (*et similia*) and «others of this kind» (*cetera huiusmodi*) in speaking

simpliciter, ita bonum est primum quod cadit in apprehensione practicae rationis, quae ordinatur ad opus... Et ideo primum principium in ratione practica est quod fundatur super rationem boni, quae est, *bonum est quod omnia appetunt*. Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, quod *bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*. Et super hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae: ut scilicet omnia illa facienda vel vitanda pertineant ad praecepta legis naturae, quae ratio practica naturaliter apprehendit esse bona humana».

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: «omnia illa ad quae homo habet naturalem inclinationem, ratio naturaliter apprehendit ut bona, et per consequens ut opere prosequenda, et contraria eorum ut mala et vitanda».

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: «Inest enim primo inclinatio homini ad bonum secundum naturam in qua communicat cum omnibus substantiis; prout scilicet quaelibet substantia appetit conservationem sui esse secundum suam naturam. Et secundum hanc inclinationem pertinent ad legem naturalem ea per quae vita hominis conservatur, et contrarium impeditur. Secundo inest homini inclinatio ad aliqua magis specialia, secundum naturam in qua communicat cum ceteris animalibus. Et secundum hoc, dicuntur ea esse de lege naturali, *quae natura omnia animalia docuit*, ut est coniunctio maris et feminae, et educatio liberorum, et similia. Tertio modo inest homini inclinatio ad bonum secundum naturam rationis, quae est sibi propria; sicut homo habet naturalem inclinationem ad hoc quod veritatem cognoscat de Deo, et ad hoc quod in societate vivat. Et secundum hoc, ad legem naturalem pertinent ea quae ad huiusmodi inclinationem spectant; utpote, quod homo ignorantiam vitet, quod alios non offendant cum quibus debet conversari, et cetera huiusmodi quae ad hoc spectant».

about the goods that he does name. His major point in this article is to identify some of the “first and common precepts” or “principles” of natural law. These include such practical propositions, which have formally the meaning of law,²⁰ as: *good is to be done and pursued and its opposite is to be avoided; life is a good to be pursued and its opposite is to be avoided; knowledge of the truth about God is a good to be pursued and its opposite is to be avoided*, etc. Propositions of this kind are definitely among the «first and common principles of natural law». But they are not, as I will now show, principles serving as premises to support the truth of the “proximate conclusions” of the “first and common” principles of natural law.

b. Other “first and common” principles of natural law

In addition to the type of “first and common” principles of natural law identified in Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2, St. Thomas identifies other “first and common” principles of natural law. In fact, in Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 3, a text cited above, Thomas says that the proposition «one should do evil to no one» is one of these “first and common” principles, known, as it were, self-evidently, and he says that there are «others of this kind».²¹ Another “first and common” principle of this kind which Thomas identifies is the principle that «one ought to do to another what he wills to be done to himself», or what has come to be known as the «Golden Rule».²²

Moreover, and this is crucially important, in the article explicitly concerned with showing that *all moral precepts* of the Old Law can in some way be reduced to the ten precepts of the Decalogue, Thomas explicitly affirms that all the precepts of the Decalogue must be referred to the two commandments of love as *conclusions* are referred to their *common principles*.²³ «*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God*», and «*Thou shalt love thy neighbor*» are indeed for St. Thomas the “first and common” principles of natural law which serve precisely as the premises for leading to the more specific moral precepts articulated in the Decalogue. Together, it thus seems, the love commandments constitute for Thomas *the basic normative principle* or *first moral principle* of natural law, the principle in light of which the *truth* of the “proximate conclusions” of natural law’s first and common principles can be understood. According to him, as we have seen, those “proximate conclusions”, which include the

²⁰ On this see *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 90, art. 1, ad 2: «...est invenire aliquid in ratione practica quod ita se habeat ad operationes, sicut se habet propositio in ratione speculativa ad conclusiones. Et *huiusmodi propositiones universales rationis practicae ordinatae ad actiones habent rationem legis*».

²¹ *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 3: «illa... quae sunt prima et communia, quorum non oportet aliam editionem esse nisi quod sunt scripta in ratione naturali quasi per se nota, sicut quod nulli debet homo malefacere, et alia huiusmodi».

²² *Ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 4, ad 1: «quisque iubetur alii facere quod sibi vult fieri».

²³ *Ibid.*, q. 100, art. 1, ad 3: «illa duo praecepta [*Diliges Dominum Deum tuum* et *Diliges proximum tuum*] sunt prima et communia praecepta legis naturae... Et ideo omnia praecepta decalogi ad illa duo referuntur *sicut conclusiones ad principia communia*».

moral absolutes of the Decalogue, can be known «immediately», with a modicum of consideration, by any human being.²⁴ Yet Thomas likewise notes that human judgment can be perverted with respect to these “proximate conclusions” from natural law’s first and common principles, and that therefore, since they are so essential for human salvation, they need another “edition”, namely through the promulgation of the Decalogue.²⁵

III. CONCLUSION: HOW DOES ONE MOVE FROM “FIRST AND COMMON PRINCIPLES” OF NATURAL LAW TO THE SPECIFIC MORAL NORMS, IDENTIFIED AS MORAL ABSOLUTES, FOUND IN THE DECALOGUE?

In the previous section we have seen how this movement takes place according to St. Thomas. In his judgment the practical reason «of anyone whosoever» can easily, immediately, and with but little consideration proceed from the truth that one is to love God and neighbor to the truth of such precepts as *Thou shalt not kill*, *Thou shalt not commit adultery*, *Thou shalt not steal*, etc. But is this movement so easy, so immediate? Writing in an age of faith, when the saving truths of divine revelation as proclaimed and understood by the Church were commonly accepted by the society in which he lived, St. Thomas seems not to have devoted considerable attention to this matter. Yet he did acknowledge, as we have seen, that human judgment regarding these specific moral norms, these natural law “precepts,” can indeed be perverted: hence the need for God to make their truth known through the revelation given to Moses, reaffirmed by our Lord, and faithfully preserved by the Church.

John Paul II, as we have seen, emphasizes in *Veritatis Splendor* that the primordial moral requirement is indeed love of our neighbor (as St. Thomas himself affirmed in Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 3, ad 1). Moreover, the Holy Father, as we have also seen, insists that the specific moral norms articulated in the precepts of the Decalogue (the commandments to which Jesus refers the rich young man when he inquires which commandments he must keep in order to gain eternal life), protect the inviolable dignity of the human person by protecting the real *goods* perfective of him. Moreover, in affirming this, John Paul II seems to me to be echoing another central truth articulated by St. Thomas in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, where he said, «God is offended by us only because we act contrary to our own good».²⁶

²⁴ Cfr. *ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 11: «Quaedam vero sunt magis determinata, quorum rationem statim quilibet, etiam popularis, potest de facili videre; et tamen quia in paucioribus circa huiusmodi contingit iudicium humanum perverti, huiusmodi editione indigent; et haec sunt praecepta decalogi».

²⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.122: «Non enim Deus a nobis offenditur nisi ex eo quod contra nostrum bonum agimus».

Moreover, if we *love* our neighbor, we will that the goods perfective of human persons—the sorts of goods identified by St. Thomas in *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2, goods such as life itself, the communion of man and woman in marriage, knowledge of the truth, especially the truth about God, and life in fellowship and friendship with others—flourish in them. Nor can we love our neighbor if we freely choose to damage, destroy, or impede those human goods, depriving our neighbor of them. This, indeed, seems to be the precise point that the Holy Father makes in *Veritatis Splendor* in his articulation of the natural law and its requirements, which include the moral absolutes excluding human acts known to be intrinsically evil by reason of their objects. By explicitly relating the precepts of the Decalogue to the real *goods* of human persons, the Holy Father has, I believe, clarified in many ways the thought of St. Thomas natural law.

The problem can be put this way. Which “first and common principles” of natural law serve as premisses to show the truth of specific moral norms which are either always and in every instance (*semper et pro semper*) valid (moral absolutes) or «valid for the most part», as St. Thomas says in speaking of some specific moral norms, such as the one requiring us to return items we have borrowed to their owners?²⁷

I believe that this question, which John Paul II has helped to clarify by explicitly relating specific moral precepts, such as those found in the Decalogue, to human goods, is even more greatly clarified by Germain Grisez in his endeavor to articulate more explicitly and rigorously the movement from first and common precepts to specific moral norms, an endeavor in which he has been joined and aided by John Finnis and Joseph Boyle.²⁸

These authors first of all distinguish more explicitly than does St. Thomas the different sorts of “common and first principles” of natural law. As we have seen, Aquinas includes, among these principles, *both* those principles directing us to do and pursue the good and identifying the real goods of human person that are to be pursued in action *and* normative first principles, of which the most basic is the twofold command to love. Yet St. Thomas does not *explicitly* distinguish between these two sorts of “common and first” principles. Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle explicitly draw attention to these different sorts of first principles of natural law, identifying the first sort, i.e., those identified by St. Thomas in *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 2, as “principles of practical reasoning”, i.e. principles ruling out purposelessness in action and directing us to pursue the goods perfective of us as human persons, and

²⁷ On this see *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, art. 4.

²⁸ The most developed presentation of his understanding of natural law is provided by Grisez in *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), chs. 5, 7, and 8. See also the following works which Grisez co-authored with John Finnis and Joseph Boyle: *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality, and Reality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); «Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends», *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987) 99-151.

identifying the second sort of first principles—the love commandments, the Golden Rule, which St. Thomas discusses, e.g., in *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 100, art. 3—as the first “moral principles”.

They agree with St. Thomas and the Holy Father in maintaining that the primordial moral principle of natural law can rightly be formulated in religious language as the twofold command of love of God and neighbor. Commenting on this formulation, they observe that «for Jews and Christians God is the supreme good and source of all goods». Thus «loving him requires the cherishing of all goods... [including] the basic human goods... And loving one's neighbor as oneself at least excludes egoism and means accepting the fulfillment of others as part of one's own responsibility»²⁹—i.e., one loves one's neighbor by willing that the goods of human existence flourish in him or her. They explicitly recognize that the love commandments of the Bible authentically express the basic or first moral principle of natural law in religious language.

Yet they do not think that this way of formulating the basic normative principle of natural law is entirely satisfactory «for purposes of ethical reflection and theology... To serve as a standard for practical judgment», Grisez writes, «a formulation must refer to the many basic human goods which generate the need for choice and moral judgment».³⁰ It should do so because the function of the first moral principle is to provide us with a criterion for distinguishing which alternatives of choice are morally good and which are morally bad. Thus Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle maintain that the first moral principle of natural law is expressed more clearly for purposes of ethical reflection and theology if it is more closely related to the first principles of practical reasoning. This means that it should articulate «the integral directiveness of the first principles of practical reasoning, when they are working together harmoniously in full concert».³¹

Consequently, they hold that the first principle of morality, expressed religiously in the twofold command of love, is more precisely formulated philosophically and theologically as follows: «In voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with integral human fulfillment», i.e., with an openness to and love for all the goods truly perfective of human persons.³²

Just as the *first principle of practical reason*—good is to be done and pursued and its opposite is to be avoided—is specified by identifying the real goods of human persons that are to be pursued in action—goods such as life itself, knowledge of the

²⁹ Grisez, Finnis, Boyle, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Reality*, p. 284.

³⁰ Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, p. 184.

³¹ Grisez, Finnis, Boyle, «Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends», 128.

³² Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, p. 184; Grisez, Finnis, Boyle, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Reality*, p. 283. See «Practical Principles, Moral Truths, and Ultimate Ends», 128.

truth, harmony with others—so too, these authors propose, the *first moral principle of natural law*, formulated religiously as the twofold command of love and formulated more philosophically and theologically as noted in the previous paragraph, is further specified by identifying ways of choosing that are *not* compatible with respect for «integral human fulfillment», i.e., the whole range of real goods perfective of human persons. They note that St. Thomas himself had identified some of these further specifications of the first moral principle, for he had included, among the common and first principles of natural law, such normative principles as the Golden Rule and the principle that we are to do evil to no one. The purpose of these further specifications of the first moral principle, which they call «modes of responsibility», is to «pin down» the primary moral principle by excluding as immoral actions which entail willing in certain specific ways incompatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment.³³

Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle express these «modes of responsibility» negatively because formulating them in this way shows that it is impossible for these normative principles to come into conflict, because one can simultaneously forbear choosing and acting in an infinite number of ways.³⁴ Thus they express the Golden Rule or principle of fairness as follows: «One should not, in response to different feelings toward different persons, willingly proceed with a preference for anyone unless the preference is required by intelligible goods themselves», and they express the principle formulated by St. Thomas as «one ought to do evil to no one» in two ways: (1) «One should not be moved by hostility to freely accept or choose the destruction, damaging, or impeding of any intelligible human good», and (2) «One should not be moved by a stronger desire for one instance of an intelligible good to act for it by choosing to destroy, damage, or impede some other instance of an intelligible good».³⁵ In addition to the three modes of responsibility just noted, these authors identify five more, but it is not necessary here to list all of them.³⁶ Put briefly, they exclude ways of choosing whereby one would intentionally ignore, slight, neglect, damage, destroy, or impede real goods of human persons or act in ways based purely on nonrational feelings or in ways that unfairly and arbitrarily limit participation by human persons in these goods.

In the light of these basic normative principles, which specify ways of choosing incompatible with a will toward integral human fulfillment, one can then show clearly the truth of specific moral norms. Such norms are discovered by considering the ways a proposed human act relates a person's will to the basic goods perfective of human persons and by considering such a proposed human act in light of the first principle of morality and its specifications or modes of responsibility.

³³ Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, p. 189.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

³⁶ They can be found in *ibid.*, p. 225.

Many specific moral norms, while true, are not absolute or exceptionless. They are not absolute because they are open to further specification in the light of the same moral principles from which they were derived. Keeping promises is an example and so is returning goods to one from whom one has borrowed them (the example used by St. Thomas in *Summa theologiae* to illustrate a norm that is binding only for the most part). We are obliged to keep promises and return borrowed items because these acts are required by the principle of fairness or the Golden Rule. However, when keeping a promise or returning a borrowed item would harm the human good of harmony among persons and if this good could be protected by breaking the promise or by not returning the borrowed item *without being unfair or violating the Golden Rule*, then the obligation to keep the promise or to return the borrowed item ceases.³⁷

But other specific moral norms, including those found in the precepts of the Decalogue, are absolute or exceptionless. One ought never intentionally kill innocent human beings (the fifth commandment), commit adultery or have intercourse with someone other than one's spouse, and so forth, because one willing to do the human acts specified by these moral objects is indeed choosing to damage, destroy, or impede the good of human life and the good of marital communion. Nothing can further specify these acts which would prevent them from violating the normative requirement that we are not to adopt by choice a proposal to damage, destroy, or impede a fundamental human good. In freely choosing to act in this way, we are willing to "do" evil, and we show that we are *not* willing to honor integral human fulfillment.³⁸

In my opinion, the work of Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle helps greatly in showing how we move from the "first and common principles" of natural law to specific moral norms and in showing why some specific moral norms are absolute insofar as they exclude intrinsically evil acts. Their work is very helpful in defending and further clarifying the moral teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* on natural law and its requirements. The "central theme" of the Encyclical, the universality of moral absolutes excluding intrinsically evil acts, is rooted in natural law; and the work of Grisez, Finnis, and Boyle is most important in showing precisely how these moral absolutes are contained in this law.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 256-257.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

Riassunto. Il presente articolo intende mostrare il contributo di Giovanni Paolo II alla comprensione della legge naturale in *Veritatis Splendor*, e soprattutto la luce gettata sul «movimento» che dai primi principi conduce agli assoluti morali. L'insegnamento di Papa Giovanni Paolo II contenuto nella sua Enciclica si richiama alla dottrina di san Tommaso e ai diversi livelli o «gradi» della legge naturale, nonché agli sforzi di Germain Grisez e dei suoi collaboratori, John Finnis e Joseph Boyle, condotti in vista di un approfondimento di alcuni aspetti del pensiero di san Tommaso relativo alla legge naturale.

Résumé. L'objet de cette communication est de démontrer la contribution du Pape Jean-Paul II à la compréhension de la loi naturelle dans *Veritatis Splendor*, et notamment la lumière qu'il jette sur le «mouvement» qui conduit des principes fondamentaux de la loi naturelle elle-même vers les valeurs morales absolues. L'enseignement de Jean Paul II dans son Encyclique est lié à la pensée de saint Thomas sur la loi naturelle et ses différents niveaux ou «grades», ainsi qu'aux efforts consacrés par Germain Grisez et ses confrères John Finnis et Joseph Boyle au développement de certains aspects de l'enseignement de saint Thomas sur la loi naturelle.

Summary. The purpose of this paper is to show the contribution that Pope John Paul II has made to understanding natural law in *Veritatis Splendor*, in particular the light he sheds on the «movement» from the first principles of natural law to moral absolutes. The teaching of John Paul II in the Encyclical is related to the thought of St. Thomas on natural law and its different levels or «grades», and also to the efforts made by Germain Grisez and his colleagues, John Finnis and Joseph Boyle, to develop aspects of St. Thomas's teaching on natural law.

Inhaltsangabe. Der vorliegende Beitrag soll den Beitrag von Papst Johannes Paul II. zum Verständnis des natürlichen Sittengesetzes in *Veritatis Splendor* aufzeigen. Insbesondere wird ausgeführt, wie der Heilige Vater Licht in die «Bewegung» von den ersten Grundsätzen des natürlichen Sittengesetzes hin zu absoluten moralischen Werten bringt. Die Lehre von Johannes Paul II. in der Enzyklika hängt mit den Überlegungen des heiligen Thomas zum natürlichen Sittengesetz und ihren unterschiedlichen Ebenen oder «Graden» zusammen sowie mit den Bemühungen von Germain Grisez und seinen Kollegen, John Finnis und Joseph Boyle, Aspekte der Lehre des heiligen Thomas über das natürliche Sittengesetz auszuführen.