

Law, Sin And Suffering

A Map of Life – Part 3

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1. LAW AND SIN.

CHRIST summarized the duty of man in the two phrases – "Love God," "Love your neighbour as yourself." We cannot have the Supernatural Life if we do not love God and our neighbour. But love must express itself in act, and Our Lord left us not only the summarization, but also a great body of detailed rules concerning things to be done as an expression of the twofold love and things to be avoided as contrary to it. These, then, are the laws established by God for the guidance of man's actions. The means by which men can learn what the laws are, and certain practical problems to which they give rise, will be examined in the next two chapters, which make up this booklet.

1(a). CONSCIENCE.

Now many will think that this is precisely what conscience is for. And it is absolutely true that a man must in all circumstances follow his conscience. But an investigation of conscience will show that by itself it is not sufficient – that man has not within himself an infallible teacher as to what is right and what is wrong. Conscience is not a faculty or permanent part of man. It is loose speaking to say, "I have something on my conscience." It would be more accurate to say, "I have something on my soul." There is the same difference between conscience and soul as there is between a punch and a fist. The punch is an action of the fist, a thing the fist does. Similarly, the conscience is an action of the soul, a thing the soul does. Precisely defined, conscience is the practical moral judgment of the intellect – the intellect being simply the soul itself considered in its activity of knowing things.

Whenever I am asked a question, the answer is a judgment of my intellect. Now the intellect makes many judgments, and conscience only differs from the others by its special scope. If I answer the question, "Did Richard III murder the princes in the Tower?" my answer is a judgment of my intellect; but it is purely a historical judgment, not a moral one; therefore, it is not my conscience. If the question is changed to, "Ought Richard III to have murdered the princes?" – my answer is again a judgment of my intellect, and this time it is a moral judgment, a judgment on right and wrong. But it is not my conscience, for it is not a practical moral judgment, that is to say it is not concerned with what it would be right for me to do here and now. But if the question is again changed to, "Ought I to murder the man next door whose manners are so maddening?" – the answer is not only a judgment of my intellect and a moral one, but also a practical one.

In other words, conscience is the answer given by my soul when I am faced with a question "What ought I to do, what would it be right for me to do, in this particular matter?"

Yet, you say, is that not a sufficient guide? Unfortunately no. For conscience is a judgment of my intellect and therefore like any other such judgment it can be wrong. Conscience is not universally infallible. It is often firm and definite in its answer: but an answer may be firm and definite, and yet wrong. By what does the soul judge, if it has no teacher outside itself? By what standard does it decide what is right? The answer is that the law of God is imprinted on man's nature and by that, he judges. In other words, God's laws for men are not something totally outside his nature: they correspond to something God has already placed in his nature. But in the course of ages, man's nature has grown distorted in all sorts of ways and any distortion in man's nature will mean a distortion in the thing imprinted on it. The moon, falling on a perfectly still lake, will give a perfect image of itself; but let the lake be ever so little ruffled, and the image will be broken up into small pieces: let the lake be really ruffled, and the image will be no more than broken sparkles of light scattered here and there. It is still from the moon that these sparkles come, but no one looking at them could form a picture of the lovely luminous globe of the moon itself. Thus, even where the distortion is greatest, no man's nature is without some trace of God's law still imprinted; but it is not always easy to read. If we could take the general consensus of the conscience of the race as a whole, it would probably be found to be in accord with the greater part of the natural moral law. But the individual conscience, though probably also in major accord, is apt to show startling variations, from country to country and from man to man.

Thus, even on matters which simply concern the right use of man's nature, conscience, lacking information from without, can give contradictory answers. But on the most important questions of all – those which are concerned with man's Supernatural Destiny – the unaided conscience gives no answer at all. On the question, "Ought I to divorce my wife?" – conscience, apart from God's teaching, gives different men different answers. But on the question, "Ought I to be baptized?" – conscience, apart from God's teaching, gives no man any answer.

If, then, there is no teacher capable of giving us God's law, we are left with nothing but this internal judgment of our own, which on the most obvious questions is capable of being wrong and on the most important questions can only be silent. A man must follow his conscience, the judgment of his intellect as to what is right and wrong. But the very supremacy of conscience renders it vital that conscience should be instructed.

Consider man's position. There is in him no internal faculty that tells him with either certainty or completeness, in every situation that can arise, what things are right and what wrong. Yet without such knowledge how can he so act as to reach his goal? The task of achieving the end for which one is created is like any other task: it must be done in the right way. Certain actions will help the achievement, certain will hinder it. We can only know if we are told. God who made us has told us: His Church, which enunciates His truths, likewise enunciates His laws. Nor is conscience thereby annulled: conscience is the practical moral judgment of the intellect. Now the intellect, which knows that the Church is giving God's law, will naturally judge that it is right. The Catholic who unquestioningly accepts the moral law as taught by the Church is following his conscience unswervingly.

1(b). SIN.

The Catholic therefore knows the law of right action. But knowledge is not enough. A man may know and yet disobey. Such disobedience is sin. Sin is, quite simply, breaking God's law. And in that lies its enormity.

The breach of God's law may be a small thing or a great. It may be a failing in a comparatively trifle – silly and weakening to the soul; or it may be a definite rejection of God. The first sort – venial sin – is still sin, yet it will not break the friendship that exists between the soul and God: it will not therefore damn a man's soul. The second sort we call mortal: having committed such a sin, to die without repentance means eternal damnation. We shall return to that.

(Footnote: The distinction between mortal and venial sin is very important. Between two breaches of law, there may not only be a difference of degree, but actually a difference of kind. Consider the law of the land. A man may break it by not taking out a dog-licence. Or he may break it by fighting against his country in war. It is not simply that one breach of the law is more serious than the other. The two breaches are totally different in their nature. So with the law of God. There are breaches of His law, which do not involve rejection and rebellion, others which do.)

The essence of sin's gravity, as I have said, lies simply in its breaking of God's law. It is blank ingratitude to God; to whom all men owe so much – to whom Christians know that they owe so immeasurably more than the rest of man.

It is incredible stupidity: rebellion against God is one of the most ludicrous things in the world. For whether we are obedient or rebellious, we are at every moment totally in the hands of God. He made us of nothing; by His almighty power, He keeps us above the surface of our native nothingness. Without His concurrence, we could not act at all; we could not even defy Him. The sinner, as it were, stands up in the hand of God, sustained in being by that all-powerful hand, defying God, but in his very defiance using the power which God has lent him and which God could at any moment withdraw from him.

1(c). LAW AND FREEDOM.

This fact that the essence of sin is offence against the law of God sometimes – in fact most often – misleads the sinner as to the true nature of sin. He imagines himself in a small field, bounded by a fence put there to prevent him from breaking out of the field to sample the rich possibilities of life outside. Here, he says, am I: a being full of the possibilities of development, yet my development is checked at every turn by some absurd law. This view arises from a failure to understand the nature of God's laws. His laws are no mere whims, like the laws of some stupid despot. They are, on the contrary, the expression by God of His own knowledge of man's nature and destiny. He knows the kind of being man is, for He made him. And for the same reason He knows what man is made for. God's laws, then, are a precise statement of how this particular kind of being may avoid destruction and reach his particular goal. The man who makes an engine is not limiting your freedom when he tells you not to run it beyond a certain speed. He knows that if you do you will smash the engine. And if you should plead that your nature demands more speed, that you feel stifled by such slow running – he may very well grow impatient. He knows what speed is right for the engine, for he made it.

God's laws then are best thought of as "maker's instructions," directions for the right use of ourselves. His prohibitions warn us of wrong ways of using ourselves or our neighbours. Earlier, I used the simile of a razor to illustrate the point that to misuse a thing was to destroy it. Emancipate the razor from its old humdrum task of removing hair from the face – defy the maker's statement that razors are only meant for shaving – use your razor for chopping wood and you will have a piece of twisted metal, fit only for the scrap-heap. God's law is not something altogether apart from us: the knowledge of it may have to come from outside, but the law itself is, in a special sense,

inside us. For it is a statement of the way we are made. And any action against it, is therefore an action against our own nature and is consequently destructive.

The act of running counter to God's law is sometimes justified on the ground of "self-expression." It certainly is not an expression of the self, for God, who made the self, has declared that such action is contrary to its nature. And a man who commits sin – any sin – is to that extent less of a man, just as a motor car, whose engine has been used in violation of its maker's instructions, is less of a motor car. To return to the argument of an earlier chapter in this series of booklets – freedom results only from doing what one ought. The connection between law and freedom is absolute.

Yet we sin. Our will is so made that it can choose only what appears to us as good. But two different and contradictory things may both appear to us as good from different points of view: to abstain from meat on Friday as an act of penance and remembrance of Christ's Passion, is good because God's Church demands it: to eat meat on Friday is good because our body is very fond of meat. Between these two goods, the will can choose. [The Church has subsequently amended its legislation to insist only on some act of penance on a Friday, and no longer demands abstinence from meat as the mandated form of penance, but the author's point is still clear from this illustration.] The will's tendency, since the Fall, is to choose the more immediate, what we may call the nearer good – the one we like! To take a matter of more importance.

If a married man falls in love with a woman who is not his wife, then two mutually exclusive courses of action will both seem to him, from different angles, good. To remain faithful to his own wife will seem good because God has forbidden adultery: to be faithless to her will seem good because his lower nature would find pleasure in the sin. Again, the will must choose. And its tendency, against which it must struggle, is likely to be in the direction of the lower pleasure. Temptation – however tremendous – is not sin. It is not even venial sin. But for the will to yield to it, to choose the sin – even if it never proceeds to action – that is sin – as offence against God and a contradiction of one's own nature.

1(d). VOCATION.

What has been said so far in this chapter concerns law as an expression of God's general will for all men equally. But there is likewise a will of God for each individual, what is called his vocation. Shall a man be a priest or a layman? If a priest, shall he be a secular priest or a member of a religious community? These questions are momentous. Within the priesthood, there is almost every variety of way of serving God, opening for every type of character to proceed to its fullest development. If he is to be a layman, in which of the various ways of life open to him will he best serve God's purpose for him? To take one crucial question – shall he marry or not? Marriage, God teaches, is a high and holy state: normally men and women are called to it, for it is the race's duty to carry itself on. But though it is the race's duty, it is not the duty of every individual. Celibacy, chosen for God's sake (not mere celibacy, be it noted, but a celibacy definitely dedicated to God) is a higher and holier state still. It is part of the rule of life for priests. But, exceptionally, it may be God's will for a particular man or woman living in the world.

Now there is no organ in the Church for the expression of this vocation, no official to whom one may go for an official answer. It is the most intimate of matters between God and each soul. Nor is there any one way in which God guides all souls. In some cases, circumstances arise when the sense of vocation seems to point one way and circumstances another. In all such matters, there is

possibility of self-deception, and the individual prays for clear guidance and takes the advice of experienced men.

In every case, of course, the individual vocation must be completely in accord with God's law for all men, and the existence of this general moral law is a strong aid to the clear perception of God's will for the individual.

2. LAW AND SUFFERING.

THE resistance to sin nearly always involves some degree of suffering: in some cases, it involves terrible suffering. And there are those who would relax the moral law when the suffering caused by obedience to it appears to be extreme.

Now, no one can alter God's law. Even the Church cannot do that: within the framework of His law, she may make what we call by-laws, binding upon her members, but these must be in accord with God's law, which she cannot change.

This point is not always grasped. The Church has received from God the power to make laws binding upon her members. But this power, as I have said, is subordinate to the laws stated by God Himself as binding upon men. The distinction may be illustrated in the case of marriage. The Church cannot grant any of her children a divorce because when they make the contract of marriage (that is to say, agree to take each other as husband and wife for life) God brings into being a new relationship. Now, by God's act consequent upon their contract, they are man and wife. This new relationship, though it follows upon their contract, is not created by their contract, but by God. The Church can no more make them cease to be husband and wife than it could make a father and son cease to be father and son. But within the law laid down by God, the Church can legislate. It can, for instance, decree that for the marriage of a Catholic, the presence of a priest as witness is necessary. These laws being its own the Church can alter. But she cannot alter the laws given to her by God to be taught to men. Nor does she want to.

First, and most obviously, because of the nature of the law, as already set out. As it stands, God's law is a statement by man's maker of the right way for men to act. It is an expression of God's knowledge, and for human knowledge to try to change it would be absurd. Human institutions may try to alter the law out of pity for suffering men: but the law they are trying to alter is the law given by one who is Infinite Love.

But even if God's law were a lesser thing than that, the effort of men to make it easier would still be futile. No one but the lawmaker can alter the law. If anyone else claims to, it is of no avail. For at the end of life, it is the lawmaker who is to judge us, and He will judge us according to His laws as He made them, not according to the modifications introduced into His laws by men. It is as though one were doing an examination paper and some kindly soul, entering the room and discovering that we were in difficulties, ill at ease with the paper, and so he altered the questions to make them easier for us. His act would undoubtedly make the writing of our paper easier: but it might make the reading of the examination results less pleasant.

But there is something worse than mere futility in this altering the moral law to reduce suffering. To make clear what it is, we must look a little more closely into the nature of suffering.

Suffering is not necessarily an evil. As we have seen, a thing is evil if it hinders a being in the attainment of the purpose for which the being exists. In the fullest sense, therefore, a thing is evil

for man only if it makes it more difficult for him to save his soul. Now suffering does not necessarily do so. Only sin is always and necessarily an evil.

Ordinary observation of life shows that suffering may work in two ways. First, it may be good for the sufferer: we know that a man who has never known suffering is soft and undeveloped. His character lacks substance. Immaturity clings about him. And not only do we find that this minimum of suffering is apparently necessary for man's proper development: we also find that really great suffering, if it had been dominated, has the power of enriching the character of the man or woman who has suffered. Suffering, if it ruins some characters, enriches others. It is not necessarily an evil, but may be an immense factor for good. Which it is to be depends, for every man, on the way he accepts it. It lies in him to dominate it or to be dominated by it.

Second, suffering often has a purpose. Life is a period of testing: the suffering that arises in it is part of that test. Suffering may be either curable or incurable. If it is physically incurable, a man must put up with it: he has no choice. If it is curable, but only by a breach of the moral law, a man need not put up with it, he has a choice; yet he is morally bound to put up with it. These two sorts of suffering – the sort that cannot be avoided at all and the sort that cannot be avoided without sin – represent the test that God allows every man to go through. Every man has not the same test: some men have more suffering than others: but no man is allowed by God to have more than he can, with the aid of God's grace, bear. Part of the Christian law is love of neighbour, and the relief of suffering is one of the noblest expressions of this love. But it must be within the limits of God's law.

Thus, the effort of men to relax the moral law so that others shall not suffer unduly is aimed at altering the test devised by God Himself. And there is another thing. Life is not only a testing to see if a man is fit; it is likewise a preparation to make him fit. Suffering, as we have seen, can immensely enrich the soul. And the whole of life represents God's means of bringing a soul to its highest point of development. It is for God to measure the amount of suffering necessary for a man's perfection. And anyone who tries to modify God's law in order to reduce the suffering is ensuring that the soul shall not become as fine a thing as it might. Steel is a beautiful thing: but it has taken an immense heat to bring it to its right perfection. Anyone who, as it were in kindness, cut down the heat to half, would prevent the metal from ever being more than a useless mess. Some suffering is necessary: God knows how much each man needs: and it is by the suffering that cannot be legitimately avoided that God shows the measure of what is necessary.

The essence of the conquest of suffering is that it should be voluntary. Now the suffering that one could avoid by committing sin is obviously, in the strictest sense, voluntary. One has exercised a choice. But the suffering that one cannot avoid at all may equally be made voluntary: a man can accept it as coming from God's hands, thank God for it as the means by which God is choosing to fit his soul for its eternal destiny, and offer it to God for his own sins and the sins of other men.

When man has thus voluntarily accepted suffering, he has made one of the greatest of human conquests. For men naturally flee from suffering in fear of it. By an act of one's will to, accept what all men flee from is in itself a triumph. But to go further – as the saints have done and many who are less than saints – and inflict suffering upon oneself – that is the supreme triumph over human weakness: for it is a positive going out to seek what other men flee from.

This infliction of suffering is not, of course, a mere aimless love of suffering. Nor does it arise, as some asceticisms have arisen, from hatred of the body or any feeling of the body's worthlessness. It has the immediate practical end of helping to bring the body into proper subordination to the soul –

for a body not subordinate can ruin the whole being, and fail to achieve its proper freedom as a body. But mortification has another significance, which can be no more than touched on here. As there was a suffering of Christ's natural body, so there is a suffering of His mystical body. The human member can unite his suffering with Christ's, and offer them for the whole body. "I fill up in my flesh," says Saint Paul, "what is wanting to the suffering of Christ for His body which is the church."

Human life, then, we may see as the preparing for the life of Heaven. It means, on the one hand, complete self-conquest. The soul must conquer the body and bring it into full obedience to God's law: and the soul must itself come into full submission to God. It has, from God's Church, the truths it needs to know about God and man and its own destiny: from the same source, it has the law, which will govern it in the right use of itself and in the right relation of love and duty to others. But, as has been seen, given that man is to live a life above his nature, he needs those gifts above his nature, which we call the Supernatural Life. In the next two chapters in my next booklet, I shall discuss the Life.

[The full text of A Map of Life, from which this booklet is taken (Chapters 9 and 10), can be found on line at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/MAPLIF.TXT>

It is considered one of Frank Sheed's best books. A Map of Life is also regarded as one of the best and most popular short summaries of the Catholic faith ever written. Focusing on the major truths of our existence and purpose in life, Sheed draws on God's revelation to show what the divine master plan is for us and how each part of the plan is related.

Beginning with "The Problem of Life's Purpose" and "The Problem of Life's Laws", he covers such important parts of the map of life as "The Creation and the Fall", "The Incarnation", "The Mystical Body", "The Trinity", "Law and Sin", "The Supernatural Life", and "Heaven, Purgatory, Hell".]
