

A Prelude to Learning about Natural Law

For more information, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1954-1960.

What does “law” mean?

Law: A law is an ordinance of reason established by the proper authority for the common good. A law is a principle of guidance that leads something to its goal.

What does “natural” mean?

Natural: Natural means something innate (*natural* comes from the Latin word for “to be born”), something essential, something that comes from the very fact that a thing is what it is.

Thus, the **natural law** refers to the law of human behavior that is in human beings not because it has been added from outside them but because it comes necessarily from what it means to be human.

The natural law is the *participation that a rational creature* (a creature with the use of reason, i.e., angels and human beings) *has in the eternal law of God*. The **eternal law** is the plan in the mind of God by which he orders the universe, leading everything to its goal. Human beings, being free, participate in the eternal law *freely*; we are free to achieve our purpose or not, to act in a way that is truly human or not.

The natural law is not a matter of religious faith or a particular culture or the laws passed by a particular government; it cannot be changed by human beings. No faith is required to know the natural law, although faith makes it easier. (E.g., The Ten Commandments indicate basic precepts of the natural law, and the content of the Ten Commandments can be known even by non-believers, but God also revealed the Ten Commandments so that it would be *easier* for us to know them and to *remind* us of their importance.)

The natural law is the basis of other laws (e.g., the revealed law of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and laws made by human authorities).

The first, *general* precept of the natural law is: **We must always do good and avoid evil.**

The *specific* precepts of the natural law are arrived at by reflecting on human nature. In other words, by knowing *what* a human person is, we know *how he should act* in order to flourish, in order to achieve his purpose and find happiness.

When we reflect on the nature of the human person, we find natural *appetites* (generic attractions), and *inclinations* (leanings toward things).

Some *appetites* of the human person are: the will (attraction to the universal good), the concupiscible appetite (desire to seek what gives sense pleasure, such as food, water, and sleep), and the irascible appetite (desire to resist whatever gets in the way of seeking what gives pleasure).

Some *inclinations* of the human person are: inclination to self-preservation, inclination to life in society, inclination to raise children.

So, the natural law deals with the proper regulation of human behavior according to these appetites and inclinations. Human beings flourish when they use their reason to govern their appetites and inclinations, putting their emotions and attractions, etc. at the service of what is truly good rather than letting them be an obstacle. Thus, the natural law commands the development of **virtues**.