

#### **4. Conscience and Natural Law**

We know the good by means of our conscience, which according to the Vatican Council is the voice of God written in our hearts that enables us to discern the principles of the law. Conscience is a capacity, a process, and a judgment. It affirms that we are capable of knowing the good, that we search for the good, often through an extended process of deliberation, and that we make judgments about the proper course of action to take in particular situations. Conscience helps us discern the natural law, the fundamental principle of which is "Do and pursue good, and avoid evil." The concept of human nature is not opposed to the concept of the human person. They are complementary concepts, both of which are necessary for understanding our human reality.

**I. Introduction: How Do We Know the Good?** Capax Dei; Theonomy (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 41) 3. Conscience: The Voice of God (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16) "Conscientia" (literally: knowledge with, or with knowledge); Types of Conscience: True, informed, erroneous, scrupulous, lax, Responsibility to follow one's conscience;

Scintilla Rationis ("Spark of Reason") 1. Reason Before the Fall; Reason Is Weakened as a Consequence of the Fall; Our Minds Have Been Darkened by the Fall; We See Only Dimly; Conscience Is What Remains of Our Ability to Know the Good.

#### **II. The Three Dimensions of Conscience and Moral Action**

1. Capacity (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 12); Cap ax Dei Synderesis: A Habit of the Practical Intellect Holding the Primary Precepts of the Natural Law; Primary Precept: Do and Pursue Good; Avoid Evil 4. Explanation: No Innate Ideas; Process of Abstraction; Once We Get an Idea of "The Good" It Becomes Self-Evident That We Must Do It

2. Process (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 14, a. 5) Deliberation; A Back and Forth Process; A Sifting Through; A Discernment

3. Judgment (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 13) We Are Told Not to Judge; But We Make Thousands of Judgments Every Day; Conscience is a Judgment About the Good, About What Is to Be Done in this Particular Situation Reason Presents This Judgment to the Will

4. The Nature of A Moral Act: All Human Action Is Moral Action: An Action of Deliberated Will; The Sources of Moral Action (CCC 1750ff); Object: What is

Done; Intention: Why We Do Something; Circumstances: Time, Place, Action  
For an Action to Be Good Every Aspect of It Must Be Good (Bonum ex integra  
causa, malum ex quocumque defectu) - Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, I-II, .  
A Single Defect Renders the Entire Action Evil

**III. Natural Law:** Natural Law [Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, I-II,]

1. Definition of Law (q. 90, aa. 1-4); Ordinance of Reason; For the Common  
Good; Duly Promulgated By the Legitimate Authority

2. The Analogy of Law: Eternal Law (q. 91, a. 1); Natural Law (q. 91, a. 2);  
Human Law (q. 91, a. 3); Divine Law (q. 91, aa. 4-5); Law of Sin(q. 91, a. 6)

3. Human Nature: We Are a Body/Soul Composite; We Have a Number of Natural  
Inclinations

4. Natural Law: It Is Not Autonomous, a Law unto Itself; It Is a Participation in the  
Eternal Reason; The Search for a Universal Ethics;

5. Natural Inclinations: Primary Principles of the Natural Law (q. 94, a. 2);  
Self-Preservation: Shared with All Substances; Procreation and the Rearing of  
Offspring: Shared with All Animals; Search for Truth and Justice, Life in Society:  
Shared with All Rational Beings; These Primary Precepts Are Immutable

6. Secondary and Tertiary Precepts of Natural Law: These Precepts Should Flow  
from the Primary Precepts; If They Do Not, Then They Are Unjust, And They Do  
Not Meet the Requirements of a Just Law; And Hence They Need Not Be  
Followed

Conclusion: Man and Nature: Cosmos: Means "Order" in Greek; We Speak of the  
Laws of Nature That Govern the Physical Universe; Man Is a Part of Nature  
We Can Speak of the Laws of Human Nature, Which Govern Man - Give Him  
Order; The Concept of Human Nature Is Not Opposed to the Concept of the  
Human Person; The Two Concepts Complement Each Other; Both Are Necessary  
for Understanding Our Human Reality

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Why is conscience referred to as the "voice of God"?
2. What does conscience know?
3. Must we always follow our conscience?