



We live in an age in which justice is often identified with legality. If something has been approved by a parliament, upheld by a court, or published in an official gazette, many people automatically conclude that it is just. History, however, proves exactly the opposite. There were laws that permitted slavery, legitimized religious persecution, authorized the extermination of entire peoples, or deprived millions of individuals of their fundamental rights. All of them were legal. None of them were just.

This confusion between what is legal and what is moral constitutes one of the greatest challenges facing our civilization. When human law ceases to acknowledge a higher truth, when it no longer seeks to reflect the order willed by God and inscribed in human nature, it ceases to be an instrument of justice and gradually becomes a form of institutional violence.

This issue was masterfully addressed by **St. Thomas Aquinas**, whose doctrine of natural law remains one of the deepest contributions in the whole history of Christian philosophy and theology. Far from being an outdated medieval theory, it offers an astonishingly relevant answer to the moral relativism, individualism, and legal positivism that dominate much of contemporary thought.

The Great Question: What Makes a Law Just?

From the earliest centuries of Christianity, the Fathers of the Church understood that not every authority deserves absolute obedience.

The Apostles expressed this with extraordinary clarity when they were forbidden to preach the Gospel:

“*We must obey God rather than men.*”
(Acts 5:29)

This single sentence contains a juridical revolution.

Civil authorities do possess authority.

But that authority is not absolute.



It is limited by a higher authority: God.

Political authority does not create good and evil.

It recognizes them.

It does not invent truth.

It is called to serve it.

Here we encounter the fundamental concept of **natural law**.

What Is Natural Law?

For St. Thomas, all creation possesses an order established by God.

Nothing exists by chance.

Every being has a purpose.

Fire gives heat.

Water quenches thirst.

Trees bear fruit.

Animals follow their nature.

Human beings also possess a nature.

And that nature does not depend on fashions, elections, or parliamentary majorities.

It has been created by God.

Natural law is precisely the participation of the rational creature in God's eternal law.

It is not a legal code carved in stone.



It is an inclination inscribed in the human heart that enables reason to recognize certain fundamental goods.

For example:

- preserving life;
- forming a family;
- seeking truth;
- living in society;
- educating children;
- practicing justice;
- worshiping God.

These goods are not invented by any culture.

They exist prior to every State.

No government grants the right to life.

It merely has the duty to recognize it.

Eternal Law: The Forgotten Foundation

St. Thomas explains that every authentic law derives from a higher reality: **the eternal law**.

The eternal law is the wisdom by which God governs the entire universe.

Nothing escapes it.

The laws of physics reflect it.

Biological laws manifest it.

The moral law participates in it.

That is why the universe is not chaos.



There is an objective order.

Human justice can exist only when it respects that order.

Whenever it attempts to replace it, disorder inevitably follows.

Human Law: An Imperfect Participation

Aquinas never despises civil laws.

On the contrary.

He considers them necessary.

Without laws there would be anarchy.

Without authority there could be no social order.

Yet he establishes one decisive condition.

Human law must derive from natural law.

When it departs from it, it loses its moral legitimacy.

His famous statement still resounds with tremendous force:

“An unjust law seems to be no law at all, but rather a corruption of law.”

This does not mean that it ceases to exist legally.

It means that it ceases to bind the conscience because it contradicts justice.



What Happens When Man Decides to Create Morality?

Here begins the modern problem.

For centuries, the Western world understood that law should discover what is good.

Today, many schools of thought claim exactly the opposite.

They argue that law creates what is good.

If Parliament approves something, it automatically becomes good.

This vision is known as **legal positivism**.

According to this theory:

- there are no universal moral norms;
- law is valid simply because it has been enacted;
- the State is the ultimate source of law;
- morality belongs exclusively to the private sphere.

It appears to be a modern idea.

In reality, however, it contains one of the greatest dangers to freedom.

Because if the State decides what is just, then it can also decide which lives deserve protection, which freedoms may be abolished, or which rights no longer exist.

The history of the twentieth century offers dramatic proof.



The Twentieth Century: When Legality Produced Monsters

The great totalitarian regimes enacted laws.

They did not operate outside the legal system.

They used the legal system.

Everything was regulated.

Everything was legal.

That is precisely where the tragedy lies.

Millions of people were persecuted under perfectly enacted laws.

The problem was not the absence of legislation.

It was the absence of truth.

When law ceases to recognize an objective good, power replaces justice.

Force then takes the place of reason.

Violence Begins Long Before Weapons

When we think of violence, we imagine wars, assaults, or terrorism.

But St. Thomas invites us to look much deeper.

There is a prior form of violence.

It is violence against truth.



Whenever a law compels people to call good what is evil or evil what is good, a form of spiritual and intellectual violence begins.

Conscience is pressured.

Reason is silenced.

Truth becomes subordinate to power.

This violence is often invisible.

It does not immediately shed blood.

But it slowly destroys interior freedom.

From the Common Good to Personal Interest

One of the most original aspects of Thomistic thought is its understanding of the **common good**.

Today we tend to view society as a collection of individuals seeking to satisfy their own private interests.

Every group demands new rights.

Every individual seeks recognition.

Every movement pursues its own objectives.

Politics ends up becoming a constant negotiation between competing desires.

St. Thomas sees society from an entirely different perspective.

The political community does not exist merely to protect private interests.

It exists to lead everyone toward the common good.



What Is the Common Good?

The common good does not mean the benefit of the majority.

Nor does it simply consist in distributing wealth.

Neither is it equivalent to economic prosperity.

It is something far deeper.

It is the set of conditions that enables every person to attain his or her full human and moral flourishing.

It includes:

- justice;
- peace;
- security;
- authentic freedom;
- the family;
- education;
- religion;
- virtue.

A wealthy society may lack the common good.

A technologically advanced civilization may nevertheless be morally devastated.

Individualism Tears Apart the Social Fabric

Contemporary culture constantly repeats one message:

“Do whatever you want.”



“Follow your desires.”

“No one has the right to tell you how to live.”

“Your truth is just as valid as anyone else’s.”

This approach appears to promise freedom.

In reality, it produces isolation.

When personal interest becomes the supreme criterion, the common good disappears.

Then:

- the family weakens;
- trust vanishes;
- one’s word loses its value;
- commitment disappears;
- institutions become hollow.

A society in which everyone seeks only personal advantage eventually turns everyone against everyone else.

Paradoxically, the more the individual is absolutized, the more power the State requires to maintain order.

History proves this once again.

The Role of Virtue

St. Thomas never believed that laws alone could build a just society.

The true foundation of a nation is the virtue of its citizens.

A law can prohibit theft.

But it cannot produce honest people.



It can punish murder.

But it cannot teach love.

It can sanction corruption.

But it cannot create integrity.

Without virtue, laws multiply.

And the greater the number of laws, the more evident becomes the loss of moral responsibility.

Christ Did Not Come Merely to Save Isolated Souls

Christianity has never understood salvation as a purely private affair.

Christ came to restore all creation.

He came to restore human relationships.

He came to restore society.

He came to restore institutions.

That is why He says:

“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.”

(Matthew 6:33)

Justice begins in the heart.



But it does not end there.

It must also be reflected in the family, the economy, politics, education, and the law.

Can an Unjust Democracy Exist?

This question deeply unsettles modern thought.

The Christian answer is clear.

Yes.

A majority can be wrong.

Truth does not depend upon the number of votes.

If tomorrow a majority voted to persecute an innocent minority, such a decision would still be unjust.

Democracy determines who governs.

It does not determine what is true.

It does not determine what is good.

It does not determine what is moral.

For that reason, democracy requires a prior ethical foundation.

Without it, it degenerates into the dictatorship of the majority—or worse, into the dictatorship of those who control public opinion.



The Christian Conscience in the Face of Unjust Laws

The Church has always taught that Christians should respect legitimate civil authorities.

St. Paul exhorts us:

*“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.
For there is no authority except from God.”
(Romans 13:1)*

Yet this principle also has its limits.

Authority ceases to fulfill its proper mission when it commands what seriously contradicts God’s law.

In such cases, conscientious objection is not an act of arbitrary rebellion but an expression of fidelity to the moral order. Christians are called to act with prudence, respect, and charity, but never at the expense of truth. The martyrs of every age remain the clearest testimony that there are goods no earthly power has the right to demand we abandon.

Legal Positivism and the Loss of the Sense of Justice

When a culture ceases to ask what is just and asks only what is legal, it begins a profound moral decline.

Law ceases to be a path toward justice.

It becomes an instrument of social engineering.



Laws begin to change constantly because they no longer respond to permanent truths but to shifting majorities, ideological pressures, or economic interests.

What yesterday was considered a right may tomorrow cease to exist.

What today is proclaimed as a good may tomorrow be condemned.

This instability produces legal uncertainty, but above all it creates profound moral uncertainty.

People no longer know what to believe because everything appears negotiable.

True Freedom Requires Truth

One of the greatest confusions of our age is the tendency to identify freedom with the absence of limits.

Authentic freedom, however, does not consist in being able to choose anything whatsoever, but in being able to choose the good. A musician is truly free when he has mastered his instrument. An athlete is free when he has disciplined his body. A saint is free when, through God's grace, he has ordered his desires toward the good. Likewise, a society becomes more free the more faithfully it lives according to the truth about the human person.

Christ Himself expressed this with words that retain their full force today:

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
(John 8:32)

Truth does not enslave.

It liberates.

By contrast, when law attempts to separate itself from the truth about the human person and



from the moral order established by God, it ultimately imposes by force what it can no longer sustain through reason.

Pastoral Applications for Christians Today

Reflection on natural law does not belong solely to jurists or philosophers.

It has practical consequences for the life of every baptized Christian.

First, we are called to form our consciences correctly in the light of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church, refusing to allow ourselves to be shaped merely by prevailing public opinion or passing cultural trends.

Second, we should actively promote the common good, beginning in the places closest to us: the family, the parish, the workplace, and the local community. Charity does not oppose justice; it perfects it.

Third, Christians must participate responsibly in public life. We cannot remain indifferent to laws and institutions, for they profoundly influence both the common good and the transmission of truth.

Finally, we should remember that the transformation of society begins with the conversion of the human heart. No legal reform will ever be sufficient if virtue is absent. God's grace does not abolish human nature; it heals and elevates it, making possible an authentic culture of life, justice, and peace.

Conclusion: Returning to God's Order to Rebuild Society

The great teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas remains remarkably relevant today: human law does not create the good; it must recognize and protect it. Whenever it separates itself from natural law and the eternal law, it ceases to serve justice and becomes an instrument of power. Though it may retain the appearance of legality, it loses its moral foundation and can become a form of violence against truth, against conscience, and ultimately against human



dignity itself.

Individualism, by absolutizing personal interest, weakens the social fabric and causes society to forget that the human person reaches fulfillment only within the common good. Politics then ceases to be a service and becomes a perpetual struggle to impose competing wills. Against this trend, the thought of St. Thomas offers a profoundly Christian proposal: to recover the centrality of truth, virtue, and the order established by God.

The mission of Catholics is not to impose the faith by force but to enlighten reason with the truth of the Gospel and to demonstrate, through both word and example, that natural law does not restrict freedom—it safeguards it. Wherever laws respect the dignity of the human person, created in the image of God, and direct social life toward the common good, justice and peace flourish. Wherever that bond with the divine order is broken, legality ultimately becomes nothing more than a mask for power.

In a world where desire is so often confused with right, and the will of the majority with truth, the teaching of St. Thomas resounds with renewed force: a society will become truly human only when it acknowledges that there exists a law higher than every human statute—a law written by God Himself in the human heart. Upon that firm foundation alone can a civilization be built that is truly just, genuinely free, and open to the eternal destiny for which we were created.