Dear Friends in Christ,

Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary His Mother! We will continue a study of chapter two of *Veritatis Splendor*, the 10th encyclical of Saint Pope John Paul II, which is rich in applications for our times, particularly the correct understanding of what is meant by the term *natural law*.

**THE TRADITION OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS**

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “the light of natural reason whereby we discern good from evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else but an imprint on us of the divine light.” In other words, we as human beings are capable of discerning good from evil, not as an instinct belonging to irrational creatures (the source of much of what is actually evil for human beings), but because of our participation in the divine law. In the words of the Second Vatican Council (*Dignitatis Humanae* 3), “God has enabled man to share in this divine law, and hence man is able under the gentle guidance of God’s providence increasingly to recognize the unchanging truth.”

Man is unique among created beings. Made in God’s image, he is the only rational creature, capable of governing himself and all of creation. God, Who is loving and caring, governs man from within by guiding his reason, thereby making him the benefactor of all of creation by sharing in His own providence. Capable of choosing good over evil, man is enabled to govern himself and other human beings toward his proper end, which is eternal life with God. “This participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law.” [St. Thomas Aquinas] It is the gift of God’s providential Wisdom to enlighten man’s natural reason.

The Thomistic doctrine of natural law has been the basis of the Church’s teaching on morality. As stated in the last letter, morality is not an add-on to the revealed truth of man as preserved in the Church. It does not change with social
or political circumstances, scientific knowledge about the human person, or deeply rooted cultural habits or trends. It is timeless, because it comes from God for man's guidance.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments, granted by God through Moses to the Israelite people during their sojourn in the desert in search of a home, remain the strong stock of all morality that leads to true freedom for man. The theophany that took place on Mt. Sinai was the beginning of a new and ever-deepening relationship of God and man, which came, ironically, during a time of temptation to despair as Aaron acquiesced to the demands of the people for a false god. The noise of their revelry reached the ears of Moses during his descent from the mountain, inciting this greatest of spiritual leaders to cast the tablets of the law to the ground. In other words, Moses saw the sin of the people as a rejection of God's covenant with them. So we can see here that God's constant pleading with man, His unrelenting efforts to provide for man's welfare, His direct admission of His love through the prophets, and finally His condescension to an intimate relationship of love through the Blessed Virgin Mary, the proof of His love by His abjection on the Cross, and the ineffable beauty of the Resurrection and Ascension, through which God sealed His New Covenant with us in words and actions of hope, all reveal to us a God Who cares about us and understands our needs better than we can. "God's plan poses no threat to man's genuine freedom; on the contrary, the acceptance of God's plan is the only way to affirm that freedom." [VS 43]

NATURE AND FREEDOM

"Debates about nature and freedom have always marked the history of moral reflection; they grew especially heated at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, as can be seen from the teaching of the Council of Trent." [VS 46]

Our own times are no exception. "Objections of physicalism and naturalism have been leveled against the traditional conception of the natural law, which is accused of presenting as moral laws what are in themselves mere biological laws. Consequently, in too superficial a way, a permanent and unchanging character would be attributed to certain kinds of human behavior and, on the basis of this, an attempt would be made to formulate universally valid moral norms. According to certain theologians, this kind of 'biologicist or naturalistic argumentation' would even be present in certain documents of the church's magisterium, particularly those dealing with the area of sexual and conjugal ethics. It was, they maintain, on the basis of a naturalistic understanding of the sexual act that contraception, direct sterilization, autoeroticism, premarital sexual relations, homosexual relations, and artificial insemination were condemned as morally unacceptable. In the opinion of these same theologians, a morally negative evaluation of such acts fails to take into
adequate consideration both man's character as a rational and free being and the cultural conditioning of all moral norms. In their view man, as a rational being, not only can but actually must freely determine the meaning of his behavior. ... Love of neighbor would mean above all and even exclusively respect for his freedom to make his own decisions. The workings of typically human behavior, as well as the so-called 'natural inclinations' would establish at the most — so they say — a general orientation toward correct behavior, but they cannot determine the moral assessment of individual human acts, so complex from the viewpoint of situations.

“This moral theory does not correspond to the truth about man and his freedom. It contradicts the church's teachings on the unity of the human person, whose rational soul is *per se et essentialiter* the form of his body. The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole, — as a person. These definitions not only point out that the body, which has been promised the resurrection, will also share in the glory. They also remind us that reason and free will are linked with all the bodily and sense faculties. The person, including the body, is completely entrusted to himself, and it is in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts. The person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator.” [VS 48]

**THE UNITY OF SOUL AND BODY**

"The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole – as a person."

Once again our Saint has revealed the dignity of the human person as created by God. The body and the soul are united. All of the actions of the body can be governed by the man who possesses his own soul. It is true that circumstances such as ignorance, emotional duress or immaturity can influence the actions of people, a fact that every pastor knows well. But the sacrament of reconciliation can lead to a strengthening and enlightenment of the soul.

I remember when I was working for a while as a volunteer at a parish in the Boston area. One day, another volunteer and I entered a youth recreation center and were saddened to see this sign: "Got a hot date planned? Don’t forget your condoms." My friend suggested rewording the message like this: "Can’t be better than the animals? Don’t forget to cover your tracks."

To imply or directly state that human beings cannot be all they are called to be as children of God, sons and daughters of the Most High, whose leader in the work of salvation is no less than Christ Himself Who goes before us, is to betray our fellow human beings into despair.

“A doctrine which dissociates the moral act from the bodily dimensions of its exercise is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition. Such a doctrine revives in new forms certain ancient errors which have always been opposed by the Church, inasmuch as they reduce the human person to a ‘spiritual’ and purely formal freedom. This reduction misunderstands the moral meaning of the body .... St. Paul declares that ‘the immoral, idolaters, adulterers, sexual
perverts, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers’ are excluded from the kingdom of God. This condemnation — repeated by the Council of Trent — lists as ‘mortal sins’ or ‘immoral practices’ certain specific kinds of behavior the willful acceptance of which prevents believers from sharing in the inheritance promised to them. [VS 49]

“In fact, body and soul are inseparable: In the person, in the willing agent and in the deliberate act they stand or fall together.”


“The natural moral law expresses and lays down the purposes, rights and duties which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person. Therefore this law cannot be thought of as simply a set of norms on the biological level; rather, it must be defined as the rational order whereby man is called by the Creator to direct and regulate his life and actions and in particular to make use of his own body.”

“Only in reference to the human person in his ‘unified totality,’ that is, as ‘a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit’ can the specifically human meaning of the body be grasped.”

“The natural law thus understood does not allow for any division between freedom and nature. Indeed, these two realities are harmoniously bound together and each is intimately linked to the other.” [VS 50]

THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Our Saint has affirmed for us the immense dignity of the human person based on Scripture and Tradition. For the simple and unlearned person such as myself, the Scriptures remain a source of inspiration and truth. A spiritual director once told me that the Bible is “the book of the people” given to us by God. There is something in it for everyone. The first word of the Holy Bible is the word “In.” The last word of the Bible is the Holy Name, Jesus. Everything in between is “in Jesus.” The words that come to mind now to close this letter are those of St. Paul:

“I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me.” Phil 4:13