

A Thomistic Perspective on Worship

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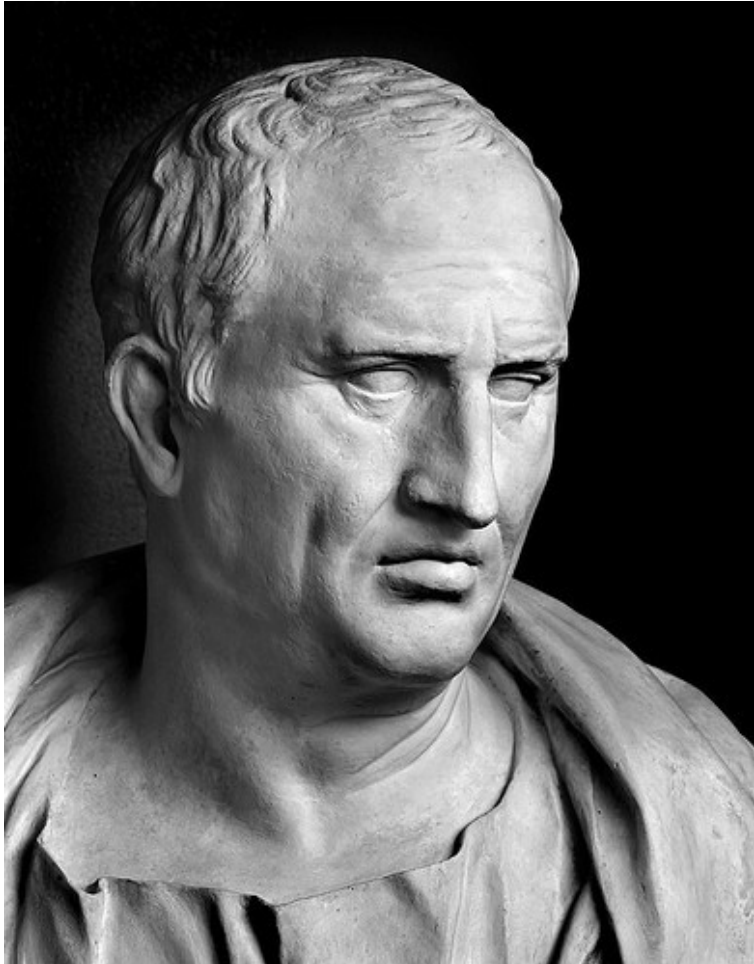
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The Natural Law

- One of the best known teachings in St. Thomas Aquinas is that of Natural Law.
- It is the philosophical doctrine that certain moral principles are inherent in human nature, and are universally cognizable through human reason (apart from Divine Revelation).
- This philosophical doctrine originated among the Stoics (esp. Cicero, 1st cent. BC, and Seneca, 1st cent. AD), but it was hugely developed by St. Thomas.
- It is not only Aquinas' teaching: it is also the teaching of Scripture and the Church.



Cicero on the Natural Law



“For there is a true law: right reason. It is in conformity with nature, is diffused among all men, and is immutable and eternal; its orders summon to duty; its prohibitions turn away from offense To replace it with a contrary law is a sacrilege; failure to apply even one of its provisions is forbidden; no one can abrogate it entirely” (Cicero, *De re publica*, III: 22, 33).

St. Paul on the Natural Law

“For whosoever have sinned without the law, shall perish without the law; and whosoever have sinned in the law, shall be judged by the law. For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature those things that are of the law; these having not the law are a law to themselves: Who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness to them, and their thoughts between themselves accusing, or also defending one another....” (Rom. 2:12-15, Douay-Rheims Translation).





St. Thomas on the Natural Law

- St. Thomas defines the Natural Law as: “the rational creature’s participation in the Eternal Law,” i.e., in God’s ruling of the universe (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II.94).
- “The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God has given this light or law at the creation” (St. Thomas, *On the Ten Commandments*, 1).



Leo XIII on the Natural Law

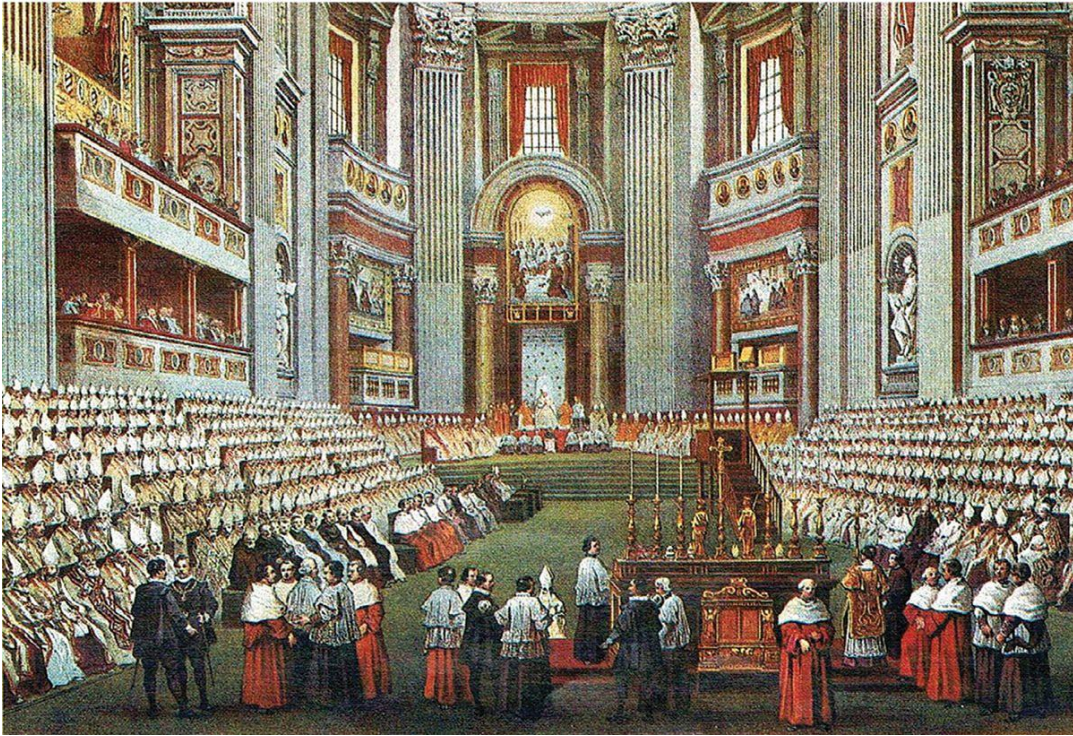
“The natural law is written and engraved in the soul of each and every man, because it is human reason ordaining him to do good and forbidding him to sin.... But this command of human reason would not have the force of law if it were not the voice and interpreter of a higher reason to which our spirit and our freedom must be submitted” (Leo XIII, *Libertas praestantissimum*, 597.).

Natural Law: Applications

- This doctrine on the Natural Law is often applied by Catholics to the fields of bioethics, sexual ethics, etc.
- But Natural law applies to all major areas of our behavior.
- One area which has been largely ignored is that of religious worship.



Vatican I on Reason's Capacity to Know God



Note: Although the council did not define Aquinas' 5 Ways, these are still seen as paradigmatic among philosophers and theologians as classical proofs for God's existence.

The council defined infallibly that: "God, the beginning and end of all things, can, from created things, be known with certainty by the natural light of human reason." (*De revelatione*, Ch. 2.).

The council condemned the following proposition as heretical: "The one true God our Creator and Lord, cannot, through the things that are made, be known with certainty by the natural light of human reason" (*De revelatione*, canon 1).

Aquinas on the Natural Knowledge of Worship

The knowledge of God's existence is coupled with a knowledge of our duty to worship Him:

"[N]atural reason tells man that he is subject to a higher being, on account of the defects which he perceives in himself, and in which he needs help and direction from someone above him: and whatever this superior being may be, it is known to all under the name 'God'. Now just as in natural things the lower are naturally subject to the higher, so too it is a dictate of natural reason in accordance with man's natural inclination that he should render submission and honor, according to his mode, to that which is above man" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.85.1c).

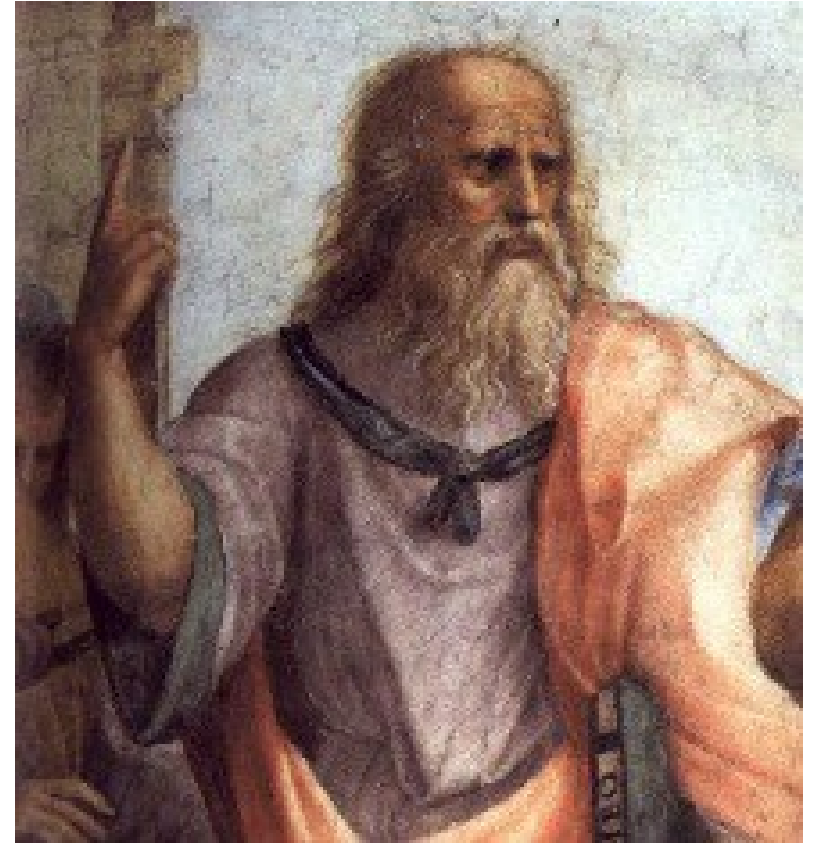


Religion is a Matter of Justice towards God

Even pagan philosophers like Plato and Cicero were aware that there was a duty to worship *out of justice to God*:

- “The part of justice which has to do with service of the gods constitutes piety and holiness” (Plato, *Euthyphro* 12e).
- “Religion is that part of the virtue of justice that offers care and reverence to a certain superior nature, which they call divine” (Cicero, *De rhetorica inventione* 2.52).

St. Thomas inherits this doctrine and Christianizes it.



The Purpose of Worship: God's Honor and Glory

- “It pertains to religion to render due honor to someone, that is, to God” (*ST II-II.81.2c*).
- “To religion pertains doing certain things for the sake of divine reverence” (*ST II-II.81.2 ad 1*).
- “The good to which religion is ordered is to exhibit due honor to God” (*ST II-II.81.4c*).
- “Now due worship is paid to God, in so far as certain acts whereby God is worshiped, such as the offering of sacrifices and so forth, are done out of reverence for God. Hence it is evident that God is related to religion as [its] end [or purpose]” (*ST II-II.81.5c*).
- “Religion orders man to God... as to an end” (*ST II-II.81.5 ad 2*).
- “Religion... does those things that are directly and immediately ordered to divine honor” (*ST II-II.81.6c*).
- “Divine worship is ordered... primarily to exhibiting reverence to God” (*ST II-II.92.2c*).
- “The end of divine worship is that man may give glory to God” (*ST II-II.93.2c*).



Natural Law and the Need for Rituals and Sacrifice



Hence, even the need for religion and its rituals are a matter of natural law:

“[T]he mode befitting to man is that he should employ sensible signs in order to signify anything, because he derives his knowledge from sensibles. Hence it is a dictate of natural reason that man should use certain sensibles, by offering them to God in sign of the subjection and honor due to Him, like those who make certain offerings to their lord in recognition of his authority. Now this is what we mean by a sacrifice, and consequently the offering of sacrifice is of the natural law” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.85.1c).

Sacrifice: The Greatest Exterior Act of Worship

- “Among other things which pertain to worship, sacrifice may be seen to have a special place, for genuflections, prostrations, and other manifestations of this kind of honor may also be shown to men, though with a different intention than in regard to God. But it is agreed by any man that sacrifice should be offered to no person unless he is thought to be God or unless one pretends to think so. Now, external sacrifice is representative of true, interior sacrifice, by which the human mind offers itself to God. Indeed, our mind offers itself to God as the principle of its creation, the author of its actions, the end of its happiness. These attributes are, in fact, appropriate to the highest principle of things only.... Therefore, man ought to offer sacrifice and worship only to God, the Most High, and not to any other kind of spiritual beings.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.120).



Natural Law and its Determination by Positive Law



The Natural Law dictates that we should avoid harming others on the road, but not the particular side of the road on which we drive.

- “[I]t must be noted that something may be derived from the natural law in two ways: first, as a conclusion from premises, secondly, by way of determination of certain generalities. The first way is like [when] demonstrated conclusions are drawn from premises: while the second mode is like [when] the craftsman needs to determine the general form of a house to some particular shape. Some things are therefore derived from the general principles of the natural law, by way of conclusions; e.g. that “one must not kill” may be derived as a conclusion from the principle that “one should do harm to no man”: while some are derived therefrom by way of determination; e.g. the law of nature has it that the evil-doer should be punished; but that he be punished in this or that way, is a determination of the law of nature” (*Summa Theologiae* I-II.95.2c).

What the Natural Law Prescribes Regarding Worship

- “It belongs to the dictate of natural reason that man should do something through reverence for God. But that he should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but is established by Divine or human law” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.81.2 ad 3).
- “[C]ertain things belong in general to the natural law, while their determination belongs to the positive law; thus the natural law requires that evildoers should be punished; but that this or that punishment should be inflicted on them is a matter determined by God or by man. On like manner the offering of sacrifice belongs in general to the natural law, and consequently all are agreed on this point, but the determination of sacrifices is established by God or by man, and this is the reason for their difference” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.85.1 ad 1).



What the Natural Law Prescribes Regarding Worship

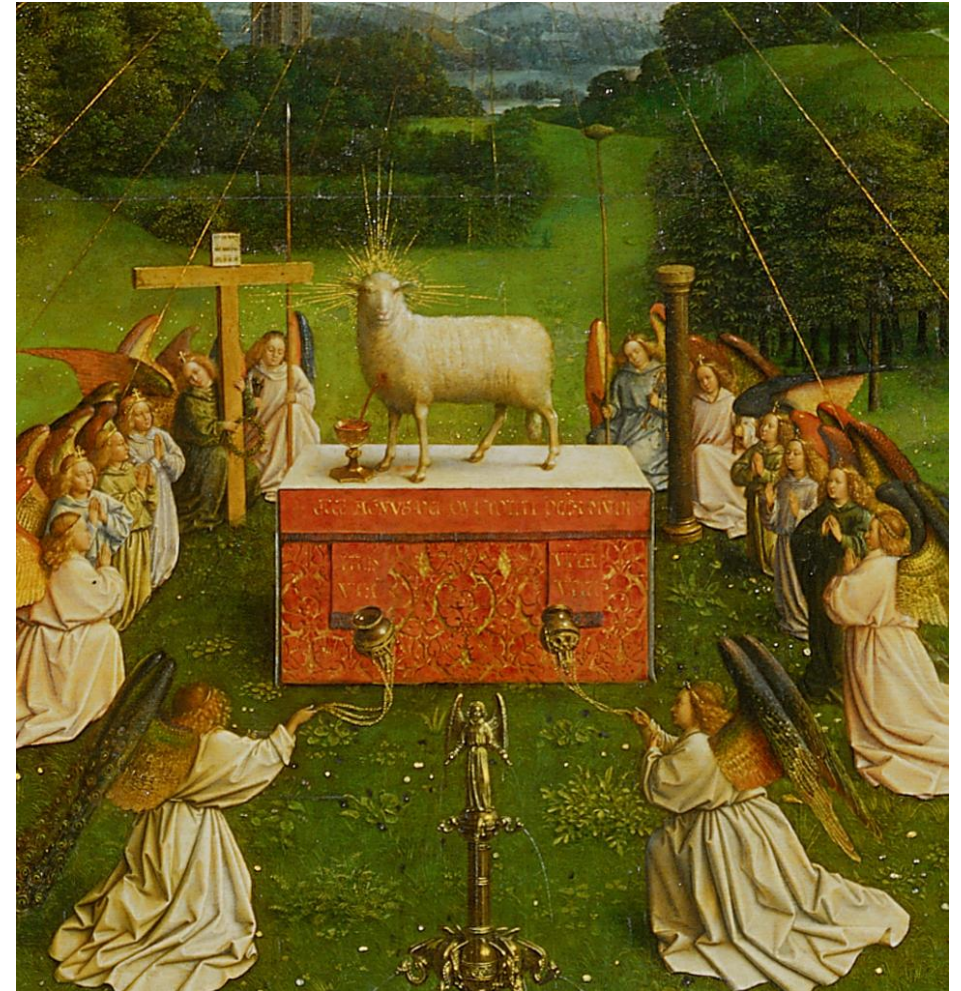


Ancient mosaic depicting Abel and Melchizedec offering their sacrifices to God.

- “The ceremonial precepts of the Old Testament are determinations of the precepts of the natural law and of the moral precepts; therefore, in regard to what they had from the natural law, they were observed before the Law without any precept. For the fact that something is offered to God in recognition of His creation and dominion is natural; but that He should be offered goats and heifers is a ceremonial precept.... And this was done particularly because the main reason for rendering worship to God is to signify that whatever a man has, he received from God and that he depends on Him for his entire perfection” (Aquinas, *Commentary on Hebrews* Ch. 7, lect. 1).

What the Natural Law Prescribes Regarding Worship

- “[T]he obligation [to offer sacrifice] was not the same for those under the New or the Old Law, as for those who were not under the Law. For those who are under the Law are bound to offer certain definite sacrifices according to the precepts of the Law, whereas those who were not under the Law were bound to perform certain outward actions in God’s honor, as became those among whom they dwelt, but not definitely to this or that action” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.85.4c).



“Behold the Lamb of God” (John 1:29).

The Sacraments: Natural Law Specified by Divine Law



“Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)

- “As Augustine says (*Contra Faust.* 19), diverse sacraments suit different times.... Consequently, just as under the state of the law of nature man was moved by inward instinct and without any outward law to worship God, so also the sensible things to be employed in the worship of God were determined by inward instinct. But later on it became necessary for a law to be given from without... in order to signify more expressly the grace of Christ, by which the human race is sanctified. And hence it became necessary to determine things for men to make use of in the sacraments” *ST* III.60.5 ad 3).

Christian Worship Must Perfect the Natural Law



- Catholic Principle:
 - Grace does not destroy nature but presupposes it and perfects it (*gratia non destruit naturam sed supponit et perficit*).
 - Our Christian worship presupposes our nature (and natural law) and perfects it.

Conclusions and Applications: Sacrificial Focus and Divine Orientation

- *Conclusions:* To perfect the Natural Law, our prayer must be:
 - Centered on sacrifice, which is the greatest act of worship.
 - Oriented towards God as to its end/purpose.
- *Applications:*
 - Focus on the Sacrifice of the Mass as being its true essence.
 - Orientation in Worship (altar/prayer *ad orientem*).



The Argument (Summary)

- Natural law: not just for bioethics, sexual ethics, etc., but applies to most areas of our behavior, including religion.
- God's existence can be known naturally with certainty (Romans, Vatican I).
- The knowledge of God's existence is coupled with a knowledge of our duty to worship Him.
- Hence, religion is a matter of natural law.
- Religion, even before Christianity, was known as a duty of justice towards God.
- The end or purpose of worship: the honor and glory of God.
- What natural law prescribes and what it doesn't prescribe.
 - Does: Sacrifices
 - Does not: Details and particulars concerning rites
- Sacrifice: the greatest exterior act of worship, necessary given our corporeal nature.
- Christian Worship/Sacrifice does not destroy, but perfects the Natural Law.
- Conclusions/Applications: to fulfil the natural law, our worship must be focused on sacrifice, must be God-oriented.