



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS  
IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON NATURAL MORAL LAW***

Clementine Hall

Monday, 12 February 2007

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Esteemed Professors,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is with particular pleasure that I welcome you at the beginning of the Congress' work in which you will be engaged in the following days on a theme of considerable importance for the present historical moment, namely, the natural moral law.

I thank Bishop Rino Fisichella, Rector Magnificent of the Pontifical Lateran University, for the sentiments expressed in the address with which he has introduced this meeting.

There is no doubt that we are living in a moment of extraordinary development in the human capacity to decipher the rules and structures of matter, and in the consequent dominion of man over nature.

We all see the great advantages of this progress and we see more and more clearly the threat of destruction of nature by what we do.

There is another less visible danger, but no less disturbing: the method that permits us to know ever more deeply the rational structures of matter makes us ever less capable of perceiving the source of this rationality, creative Reason. The capacity to see the laws of material being makes us incapable of seeing the ethical message contained in being, a message that tradition calls *lex naturalis*, natural moral law.

This word for many today is almost incomprehensible due to a concept of nature that is no longer metaphysical, but only empirical. The fact that nature, being itself, is no longer a transparent moral message creates a sense of disorientation that renders the choices of daily life precarious and uncertain.

Naturally, the disorientation strikes the younger generations in a particular way, who must in this context find the fundamental choices for their life.

It is precisely in the light of this contestation that all the urgency of the necessity to reflect upon the theme of natural law and to rediscover its truth common to all men appears. The said law, to which the Apostle Paul refers (cf. Rom 2: 14-15), is written on the heart of man and is consequently, even today, accessible.

This law has as its first and general principle, "to do good and to avoid evil". This is a truth which by its very evidence immediately imposes itself on everyone. From it flows the other more particular principles that regulate ethical justice on the rights and duties of everyone.

So does the principle of respect for *human life* from its conception to its natural end, because this good of life is not man's property but the free gift of God. Besides this is the duty *to seek the truth* as the necessary presupposition of every authentic personal maturation.

Another fundamental application of the subject is *freedom*. Yet taking into account the fact that human freedom is always a freedom shared with others, it is clear that the harmony of freedom can be found only in what is common to all: the truth of the human being, the fundamental message of being itself, exactly the *lex naturalis*.

And how can we not mention, on one hand, the demand of *justice* that manifests itself in giving *unicuique suum* and, on the other, the expectation of *solidarity* that nourishes in everyone, especially if they are poor, the hope of the help of the more fortunate?

In these values are expressed unbreakable and contingent norms that do not depend on the will of the legislator and not even on the consensus that the State can and must give. They are, in fact, norms that precede any human law: as such, they are not subject to modification by anyone. The natural law, together with fundamental rights, is the source from which ethical imperatives also flow, which it is only right to honour.

In today's ethics and philosophy of Law, petitions of juridical positivism are widespread. As a result, legislation often becomes only a compromise between different interests: seeking to transform private interests or wishes into law that conflict with the duties deriving from social responsibility.

In this situation it is opportune to recall that every juridical methodology, be it on the local or international level, ultimately draws its legitimacy from its rooting in the natural law, in the ethical message inscribed in the actual human being.

Natural law is, definitively, the only valid bulwark against the arbitrary power or the deception of ideological manipulation. The knowledge of this law inscribed on the heart of man increases with the progress of the moral conscience.

The first duty for all, and particularly for those with public responsibility, must therefore be to promote the maturation of the moral conscience. This is the fundamental progress without which all other progress proves non-authentic.

The law inscribed in our nature is the true guarantee offered to everyone in order to be able to live in freedom and to be respected in their own dignity.

What has been said up to this point has very concrete applications if one refers to the family, that is, to "the intimate partnership of life and the love which constitutes the married state... established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 48).

Concerning this, the Second Vatican Council has opportunely recalled that the institution of marriage has been "confirmed by the divine law", and therefore "this sacred bond... for the good of the partner, of the children and of society no longer depends on human decision alone" (*ibid.*).

Therefore, no law made by man can override the norm written by the Creator without society becoming dramatically wounded in what constitutes its basic foundation. To forget this would mean to weaken the family, penalizing the children and rendering the future of society precarious.

Lastly, I feel the duty to affirm yet again that not all that is scientifically possible is also ethically licit.

Technology, when it reduces the human being to an object of experimentation, results in abandoning the weak subject to the arbitration of the stronger. To blindly entrust oneself to technology as the only guarantee of progress, without offering at the same time an ethical code that penetrates its roots in that same reality under study and development, would be equal to doing violence to human nature with devastating consequences for all.

The contribution of scientists is of primary importance. Together with the progress of our capacity to dominate nature, scientists must also contribute to help understand the depth of our responsibility for man and for nature entrusted to him.

On this basis it is possible to develop a fruitful dialogue between believers and non-believers; between theologians, philosophers, jurists and scientists, which can offer to legislation as well

precious material for personal and social life.

Therefore, I hope these days of study will bring not only a greater sensitivity of the learned with regard to the natural moral law, but will also serve to create conditions so that this theme may reach an ever fuller awareness of the inalienable value that the *lex naturalis* possesses for a real and coherent progress of private life and the social order.

With this wish, I assure you of my remembrance in prayer for you and for your academic commitment to research and reflection, while I impart to all with affection the Apostolic Blessing.

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