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Life's Defense: Natural and Supernatural

by

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Defense of life can be purely natural, that is, based entirely on considerations about human nature. Such a defense is pivoted around the notion of natural law. But those who most ardently cling to the binding force of that law derive their strength from clutching the rosary beads. For pro-life Catholics those beads are a quintessential reminder of the supernatural as embodied in God born man through the Virgin. Protestant pro-lifers clutch the Bible. It is a book replete with God's supernatural entries into the natural course of history to teach man about two different sets of propositions. One set relates to matters far above the reach of human reason and nature. Man can know only through Revelation that God entered a Covenant with man, that He gave His only Son to be the Redeemer of mankind, that He became man through the Virgin, founded a Church, rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and will come again on Judgement Day, to settle His account with any and all. Revelation alone can assure one that there will be a resurrection with a new heaven and a new earth, the ultimate unfolding of a supernatural state of affairs in every respect.

Yet a great deal of that Judgement will be about what are purely natural issues. For even without a Revelation man has a distinct sense about the difference between right and wrong. Almost everything in the Ten commandments could have been formulated by mere human reasoning. Students of ancient cultures, anthropologists of primitive peoples have gathered plenty of evidence about a fairly universal conviction that murder is evil and so are theft and lies. Conviction was also fairly strong about the respect which children owe to their parents. And even as sensuality prevailed, grudging admiration was kept for those few who did not yield to lower instincts. It was even surmised, vaguely, that the mere coveting of other people's property, the lustful desiring of other people's wives, and the worshipping of carved images were so many breakings of laws set by man's moral nature.

But the same moral perceptions had nothing vague about them as they were

uttered by Moses. As he promulgated the Ten Commandments his face was bathed in a stunning light and the forces of nature — thunder, lightning, earthquake — seconded his words. Much the same additional force was in view as subsequent prophets echoed what Moses had said.

No different was the case with the prophet from Nazareth. He had already gained the reputation of a wonder-worker, by His “curing the people of every disease and illness,” before He instructed them from the Mount of Beautitudes about His new law. In some respects He merely unfolded the perfect meaning of old laws that, in theory, could have been unfolded from an analysis of human nature. But very novel had to appear the truth of the law against adultery, when it was accompanied by a miraculous insight into men’s hearts: the accusers of the adulteress could read their own hidden sins written on the ground. Again, the sin of lying had to loom enormously large when seen against the sudden death of Ananias and his wife, who claimed to have given all they had but did not.

In trying to present their faith to pagans Christian theologians have argued, from the very start, that several essentials of Christian dogmatic and moral teaching conformed with what could be learned by mere human reason. Among the doctrinal points were the oneness of God, his being the Creator of All, and his having created the world out of nothing. About man proper, they claimed that there was nothing essentially novel in the doctrine about the immortality of the soul, about monogamous marriage, and the moral precepts codified in the Ten Commandments.

But the real drawing force of Christian faith was in the very novel deeds which it could generate: selfless love of one’s enemies, charity for the poor and the sick, and, of course, the readiness to die rather than to worship idols. The Acts of Martyrs are full of references to those who suddenly declared themselves Christians on seeing the heroism of martyrs.

As to the arguments of theologians, they produced few conversions by comparison. While it was possible to make it appear logical that some essentials of Christian doctrine and morality were within the reach of reason and were most reasonable at that, the arguments appealed only to those who had already held them. Indeed, a set of propositions that later became known as natural theology, remained cherished largely by convinced Christians. Christians of our century were given a powerful reminder of this by Etienne Gilson. It was under the impact of unexcelled studies of the historical roots of medieval philosophy that Gilson reached his now famous conclusion: Medieval philosophy, or even patristic philosophy, was essentially a *Christian* philosophy.

The conclusion sounded infamous in the ears of Thomists doing their work in a historical vacuum. They felt that Gilson’s conclusion threatened the rationality of medieval or Scholastic or Thomist philosophy. They felt that as long as that philosophy carried the label *Christian*, it was not presentable to the largely non-Christian world of philosophers. Indeed they caused so much trouble for Gilson that years later he voiced his wish that he had never spoken of *Christian* philosophy. Of course, he knew that as a historian he had no choice but to say what he did say. For the fact was that those philosophical points were never significantly accepted outside Christian ambience and the Christians themselves

formulated and emphasized them under the direct impact of their faith. Still those points did not thereby become less rational and arguable before a forum ready to listen only to what reason could present.

Of course, Gilson's adversaries, prominent Thomists among them, knew what Gilson too was fully aware of. In the intellectual arena a Christian is at a basic disadvantage if he lets it transpire that his Christian convictions play a decisive role in making him espouse certain propositions, purely rational as these could be. This is a reason (there may be other less commendable ones), why so many priest-philosophers or priest-scientists prefer to wear a necktie, and at times a very gaudy one, in non-Catholic gatherings and even in strictly Catholic ones. Whether this is a good tactic to follow in officially still-Catholic universities is another matter.

Here, of course, we are in the midst of ardent pro-lifers, many of them convinced Catholics. Protestants present are, unlike their liberal kind, firm believers in the supernatural. It is to such Catholics and Protestants that I want to offer a few points about life's twofold defense; natural and supernatural. This division does not simply coincide with the division between philosophical and theological. For, as I have already noted, the philosophy espoused by Christians is, to recall Gilson again, a *Christian* philosophy, however rational.

While some of us may wish to act like ostriches, our opponents know all too well the *Christian* ingredients in our philosophy. Further they also know the special force which belief in Christ, or Revelation, plays in forming pro-life consciousness. Our opponents have taken measure of all our mental and moral resources. They also do their very best to force us to admit that what we defend is not nature but something above it. Their tactic is to show that whatever is shown to be above nature can at best be one's private preference but in no way can be imposed on one's fellow citizen's. Almost all of us can remember an incident or two to that effect.

For my part I still vividly remember a TV debate, though not too many of its specifics, that took place under the auspices of the United Nations in New York, perhaps thirty years ago. In those relatively balmy days of the 1960s contraception alone was the issue. The anti-contraception position was defended by a tall youngish professor from France or Belgium, obviously a Catholic. I still see him moving right and left in his swivel chair as he did his best to parry the objection that kept coming back: Are you against contraception because you are Catholic? He should have admitted — Yes, to a great extent — but, of course, he could not. He knew that by a mere word he would have undermined all his argumentation about natural law. So he went on denying the obvious, namely, that he was largely against contraception because he was a Catholic. It would not have helped at all if he specified the measure to which his anti-contraception convictions were influenced by his Catholic faith. For in the end he would have tried to separate two components, reason and faith, which, when taken concretely, are strongly tied together.

A still earlier memory of mine is about a report of an International Conference on natural law. It was held at the University of Notre Dame sometime in the mid 1950s. Natural law was a big topic in Catholic colleges and universities in those days. Courses on natural law were part of the curriculum, conferences were a

dime a dozen. The conference at Notre Dame was unusually big and markedly international. As usual, many papers were read, many speeches made. A reporter hit the nail on the head as he recalled that only Catholic participants defended the reality of natural law. Indeed, we Catholics oppose contraception and abortion for a reason far superior to reasons that purely philosophical reflections on our own human nature can provide.

Those purely philosophical reflections may appear to be in a very sorry state. Catholics on the liberal side have ceased writing on natural law. Catholic authors, whom everybody would put in the conservative camp, argue nowadays that nobody before has provided a good statement on natural law. Both Finnis and Grisez argue that they are the ones to see for the first time what Thomas Aquinas meant by natural law. They also claim that the commonly accepted meaning of his view ranges him with Immanuel Kant, of all people. Still others, Elizabeth Anscombe, for instance, claim that religion must first be reinstated in general thinking before natural law can be discussed. I suppose that by religion she meant Catholic or Christian religion. I also suspect that by discussion she meant its persuasive kind, which is hardly ever the case in academic debates. There nobody hardly ever convinces anybody about anything. Therein lies the rub about natural law. But this is to anticipate.

According to Thomas Aquinas, natural law is "nothing else than the rational creature's participation in eternal law." The eternal law is in turn a reflection of the wisdom whereby God creates. And since God is infinitely rational, his creation must also embody rationality. The latter in turn is synonymous with cohesiveness, stability, permanence. These qualities ought to be embodied in created things in various measures and on various levels if they are to reflect the wisdom of a Creator who is infinitely rational.

Cohesiveness and consistency are nowhere more profound in the created realm than in rational creatures, such as humans. For to think and reason is to correlate things and events, that is, to register their permanence in a welter of change. Above all man is able to correlate his own actions and reasonings, which is to register interconnections among them. Those interconnections, insofar as they are regular, are also called laws. Such is the basis of man's knowledge that he has a nature governed by laws.

A further aspect of this relates to man's reflections on the fact that he is free to act for a purpose and that some of his actions are in tune with his nature and some are not. The former are recognized as morally good, while the latter as morally evil. It is therefore in the enlightened interest of man to act only in such a way as to promote his permanence, individual and social. It is therefore not only his pleasure to eat but also his duty. And among such acts of sustenance none is so fundamental as the act of procreation. It is a law of man's nature and has to be in conformity with its very fundamental interests or laws. Further, about those laws it can also be established that they are imposed by the Creator on the natures they govern, insofar as those natures are created by God. So much in a nutshell about the roots of natural laws. They are rooted in a nature with some measure of stability and coherence.

It should be obvious that a rational God cannot be recognized from a realm

that has no coherence from moment to moment, but has to be re-created at every moment or occasion. If there is a philosopher who is worlds removed from Christian philosophy, or from the Christian doctrine of natural law, it is Ockham and his occasionalism. Ockham's occasionalism is also worlds removed from science. Scientists have always assumed that physical changes must be mere rearrangements of unchangeable bits of matter. Descartes specified three such kinds of matter; Newton spoke of atoms infinitely hard. A century ago physicists were still swearing by the ether, a form of matter as unchangeable as mysterious. With the advent of atomic physics the atoms proved to be divisible and therefore changeable, but presumably into non-divisible or unchangeable parts. Such were for a while protons and neutrons, which are now seen to be composed of quarks. It remains to be seen whether they are the unchangeable bedrock of matter. Electrons are not yet touched by such doubts. Scientists doubt only in their unphilosophical moments that their business is not to find unchangeable bits and relations in the material world as they search for laws. All those laws stand for some measure of permanency.

In biology, it was the genes that served in our times for that bedrock of living beings. The questions of the evolution of genes is still largely unquestioned. If, however, the question becomes widely discussed, a new entity, a sort of subgene, is to be postulated to justify scientific reasoning. Until Darwin it had been a firm conviction that species were unchangeable. Today, some Darwinists take the abolition of substance, or the quintessence of permanency, for Darwin's chief achievement. This is certainly a consequence of the amateurish philosophy which lies at the foundation of Darwin's theory of evolution. Well, Darwin was not a philosopher enough to speculate at length on the philosophical doctrine about substance.

At any rate, since Darwin it has become widely accepted that one species is instrumental in the transformation of one species into another. There are good reasons to hold this, even if one is not a Darwinist. However, contrary to Darwin and Darwinists, nobody exactly knows what is the mechanism of that transformation while one can confidently infer that species transform into one another.

Carelessness about this difference between what is known and what is perceived or believed had a great impact on thinking about natural law. For the carelessness means precisely that one can handle in a cavalier manner the question of what is meant by nature, including human nature, and about its consistency, coherence and stability and all their implications. It has become a widespread belief that such a cavalier attitude is an intellectually respectable stance. This is at the root of the apparently unconvincing character of discourse about natural law. Unfortunately, prominent Catholic students of natural law have contributed to this sorry state of affairs. They did so by taking a sustained look at the root of the problem. That root is cultural, and as such it will hardly be remedied by arguments, however valid.

A mere look at the word culture would help understand this apparently anti-intellectual, negativist, if not plainly defeatist, remark. Although the word culture ultimately derives from the verb to cultivate or to grow, it is an immediate

derivative of the word cult. Newspapers do not fail to remind us about irrational forms into which cult or worship can degenerate. Those forms are simply known as cults. Yet only when those cults become direct threats to life, as happened very recently in Texas, does modern society voice disapproval. Otherwise one cult, however repulsive and irrational as it may be, is viewed as being as good as any other. Such society has deliberately put itself beyond the pale of arguments. No argument about natural law should be wasted on such a society, and certainly not with the purpose of showing that contraception and abortion are against nature.

Apart from that society, though actually within it, are Christians and Catholics. Both witnessed the growth, in different measure and at different rate, of parties within them that have considerably lost their conviction about the supernatural. The sensitivity which those belonging to these parties — liberal Protestants and modernist Catholics — still retain for the supernatural is not to be taken lightly. Taking that sensitivity for a starting point, an effective supernatural defense of life can be made by recalling the unbroken, unanimous Christian tradition about abortion as an abominable evil. Yet, the defense is all too often purely natural.

Here, only some highlights can be given about that tradition which begins with *Didache*, written around 120 AD. There, in an enlargement on the Ten Commandments it is stated that "thou shalt not commit murder by abortion." A few decades later, abortion is described as murder in the *Epistle of Barnabas*. In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which until the fourth century was held to be part of the Scriptures, a horrid scene in Hell is identified as the place that contains women guilty of abortion.

Shortly afterwards we come to the first Christian theologians or apologetes. One of the first of them, Athenagoras, justifies the anti-abortionist stance of Christians on the ground that it is a fully rational stance: An abortionist "would not regard the fetus in the womb as a living thing and therefore an object of God's care . . . But we [Christians] are altogether consistent in our conduct. We obey reason and do not override it." Whether this argument convinced pagans is another matter. The point is the firmness of the argument itself. Shaky Christians are a latter-day product.

Around 200 A.D. Tertullian defends Christians against the charge that they kill little children and eat them. The charge makes no sense, Tertullian declares, because Christians are forbidden not merely to kill but "even to destroy the fetus in the womb." Tertullian then addresses himself to the purely natural instincts of women: "Do you feel any stirring of life within you in the fetus? Does your groin tremble, your sides shake, your whole stomach throb as the burden you carry changes its position? Are not these moments a source of joy and assurance that the child within you is alive and playful? Should his restlessness subside, would you not be immediately concerned for him?" Such are quite modern arguments as well, arguments about which pro-abortionists charge that they unconscionably play on private sentiments. The charge is against Christians of the earliest times as well.

Tertullian is the first to invoke two passages from the Bible against abortion. One passage is the words addressed to Jeremiah: "Before I formed thee in the

womb, I knew thee. And before thou camest forth from the womb, I sanctified thee." For Tertullian these words mean that the thing in the womb had to be a whole man for God to know it and that it had to be a fully living human being if it could be sanctified by God.

The other argument is about Elizabeth's salutation to Mary and Mary's reaction: "Each mother recognizes her child and each is known by her child who is alive, being not merely souls but also spirits." Unfortunately, Tertullian does not spell out the obvious. While John was at that time a fetus six months old [something to be protected even by *Roe vs Wade*], the fetus in Mary's womb could at that time be hardly more than two weeks old. That fetus was not defensible by that infamous law; yet that very same fetus became the ultimate ground that provides defense and rational justification for anything, including law, lawyers and law-making.

The witness of the great Church Fathers of the century after Nicea is too well-known to be recited here in detail. Yet, there should be much food for thought for hesitating Christians in Chrysostom's animated denunciation of the evil of abortion; "You see how drunkenness leads to whoredom, whoredom to adultery, adultery to murder; or rather something even worse than murder. For I have no name to give it, since it does not take off the thing born, but prevents its being born. Why then dost thou abuse the gift of God, and fight with His laws and follow after what is a curse as if a blessing, and make the chamber of procreation a chamber for murder, and arm the woman that was given for childbearing unto slaughter?"

As I said, recital of such texts still may be of use for Christians with some sensitivity for the supernatural yet cavorting with abortion. They will hardly be moved by an argument such as the one supporting the editorial that appeared not long ago in the Op-ed page of *The New York Times*. The occasion was the recent Dutch legislation permitting euthanasia. The editorial's author, Walter Reich, was described as a "psychiatrist, senior scholar and director of the Project on Health, Science and Public Policy at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars." The chief reason for his deploring the legislation, presumably motivated by compassion for the terminally sick was not religious at all. "You don't have to be religious to mourn the new law . . . All you have to understand is that a patient, no matter how ill or despondent, is still human and still alive, and that killing that patient, no matter what the law says or what the circumstances are, is still killing."

This is as straight a logic as there can be. It obviously proved to be powerless against compassion. Those who gathered outside the Dutch Parliament in protest against the new law may have been greatly motivated by that ironclad logic, but not primarily. They prayed outside the Parliament. Clearly, their motivation far transcended the purely pragmatist argument which the author of that editorial offered in addition to his praiseworthy exercise in logic. This is not to say that the argument is not powerful: "when societies legalize the killings of their own innocent members they remove an obstacle that blocks the all-too-easy slide of civilization into moral chaos."

This argument, however ominous in its perspective, fails to impress many in

the medical profession, of which Dr. Reich no longer feels himself to be a proud member. No wonder. By going along with the new legislation, he noted, "the doctor loses the mission of caring for life and takes on the role of an amoral medical technician — one whose duty could just as well be to end life as to preserve it." For all that fine exercise in logic, Dr. Reich is obviously very short on that fine commodity. Otherwise he would have noticed that all sliding started with the lifting of the ban on contraception, and became accelerated when abortion was legalized and many physicians rewrote the Hippocratic oath. Until then the new physician swore: "I will give no deadly drug to any, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such, and especially I will not aid a woman to procure abortion." Now he merely promises that he would not do anything illegal.

Clearly, no exercise in logic, not even the latest findings of science can do what the will is reluctant to implement. Rather, a mind prisoner to that compromising will, will provide the veneer of sophisticated aloofness. To such an aloofness nothing is sacred. An example of this is a report in *The New York Times* (February 23, 1993, pp. C1 and C9) about new findings concerning the so-called Hox genes. In four distinct clusters, as if directed "with a T-square and a ruler," the 38 Hox genes attach themselves to the chromosomes at four points and direct the development of the embryo still not larger than a few cells. The mechanism appears to operate as a sequential module allowing only a very straightforward development toward a very specific end. In other words, the vision imposes itself on the geneticist that through the four chromosomal groups of Hox genes there appears under his very eyes something very similar to a homunculus.

It is, of course, not true that the Hox genes had to be discovered in order to see a human in the earliest phases of a fertilized ovum. It is not "within the shadowy nucleus of the early embryonic cells" that the Hox genes operate. The embryonic cells contain the future human being from the very start. But the revealing character of the report lies in its references to medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation. Many of those renderings of the Annunciation, "when the archangel Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary she will bear the son of God, show a homunculus of Jesus headed toward Mary on a shaft of light." The most sacred is here ridiculed in an apparently dignified reference to art.

Such an aloofness in the very presence of hallowed moral perspectives can be handled only with shock treatment. The only argument, very natural to be sure, that breaks through the ramparts of that aloofness is the color photograph of a butchered embryo. No wonder that its display is passionately denounced as brutal, insensitive, and shocking. Logic is, of course, turned upside down when insensitivity protests in the name of sensitivity. That insensitivity readily takes cover under scientific success. Thus the *New York Times* hailed the cure of Alzheimer's disease with cells sucked from the brains of young human embryos as giving a new turn to the ethical nature of the procedure. Such an insensitive approach deserves the rudest jolt, the jolt of being exposed day in and day out to the photos of human embryos butchered in the name of medicine.

But it also takes, though in a very different sense, insensitivity to keep holding high those frightening color photos bathed in the reddish hues of mangled human

flesh. The insensitivity is different because it is steeling of one's nerves and the muzzling of one's deepest sensitivities. It takes enormous strength but where is it to be drawn from? From logic? Obviously not, not even from the most logical forms of the binding character of natural law. From science? Far from it. All too many scientists have a grudging admiration for that Oppenheimer who defended the making of the atomic bomb, before pondering its morality, on the ground that "when you see something technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and think about its consequences only afterwards."

Can the source of that strength be social consensus? There is no such thing any more, except the consensus that everybody can abound in his or her own sense, however senseless. The source is that religion which more than any other religion is riveted to the proposition that human life is uniquely sacred from its very first moment. That religion is Christian religion insofar as it rests on Christ and not some new-fangled ideas about self-development and self-fulfillment.

About that Christ nothing is so decisive to believe than that He is the incarnate Son of God. The Incarnation is, of course, the will of the Most High conveyed by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin and her consent to that will. The very moment she pronounced the words, "Let it be done to me according to thy word," the Incarnation was a fact. At that point she could only believe it, she had no other evidence and was not to have any physical evidence for the next twenty-eight days. Even then it was still a matter of faith on her part as to what was really taking place in her, physically. Embryology, genetics, and even gynecology were still almost two thousand years away.

But in her case too, and above all in her case, faith had to have its unexpected rewards. She rushed to Elizabeth, her aged aunt, unbelievably in her sixth month. Rush she did, the Greek text of Luke says so, and did so immediately, again according to the Greek text, the only record to go by. It was not out of curiosity that she did so. She did not rush because on verifying that some unbelievable thing happened to Elizabeth, she herself could believe the even more unbelievable about herself. A woman with Mary's faith was at safe remove of such scheming. She rushed because she wanted to help. And help she did by staying with Elizabeth for three months, the remainder of her pregnancy.

Mary certainly must have been surprised that before she could say a word about herself to Elizabeth, Elizabeth got the word. She got it from inside, from her own womb, as the baby leapt there out of joy and reverence for the arrival of his Lord. A six-month-old fetus bowed in worship to the Lord of all, not yet two weeks old, in Mary's womb. What greater witness should one expect from on High in defense of life? Strange as it may seem, this supreme witness on behalf of life has remained curiously unexploited. No encouragement has been given by leading exegetes. Of course, exegetes, like anyone else, are limited in their perception. They draw out of text, this is what exegesis is, not necessarily everything that is there. It often takes a shock to have one's eyes opened and such a shock has been available ever since abortion entered a runaway course.

Thus I find little excuse for recent leading exegetes of Luke's Gospel who invariably fail to point out the bearing which Mary's visit to Elizabeth has on the Christian view of unborn babies. Their list, sadly enough, includes even Father

Laurentin, a staunch defender of the Christmas story against those learned professors who strain themselves over half a thousand pages to make it appear that Christ was not born in Bethlehem. Exegetes who lived prior to the onset of the rise of modern abortion mills have some excuse, but not too much. It was their custom to report everything that had already been said about this or that Gospel passage. They could not be unaware of the way Tertullian used Mary's visit to denounce the evil of abortion. By and large they left it unused. I was certainly surprised to find, as I was writing ten years ago, my essay, "Christ, Catholics and Abortion," that even a Father Lagrange was among them.

Perhaps exegesis will come around in full force to support life's most incisive supernatural defense. Pro-lifers have no time to waste. They should hasten to admit explicitly what, intuitively, all good Christians have always felt in their bones. The Yes said by Mary is forever their chief argument on behalf of the unborn. It represents their chief assurance and gives them an argument which is still to be put to good use. There are many Christians who are wavering; Christians who are ready to compromise, when the crisis of an unwanted pregnancy hits close to home. They are the ones who see merit in abortion when the mother is very poor, when she is single, when she is without employment, when she is without medicare, when she is to face the resentment, nay the hostility of relatives and neighbors. But precisely because they still somehow are Christians, they would be taken aback on being told that all such arguments would have fully applied to a young girl from Nazareth: she was single, she was poor, she was to lose even the little she had if she failed to part with the Little One inside her. They would be taken aback, indeed shocked because of the incomparable hold which the Christmas story can have even on nominal Christians.

In short, it is good to recall the unique charm of Christmas, the last thing which a Christian already weakened in his or her faith and resolve would part with. In the very center of that unique charm stands Mary, who made it possible. By uttering her Yes, the greatest promise of the Father, his Son, who, is not, as Saint Paul put it, Yes and No, has become the supreme assertion of life and its defense which unites in one the natural and the supernatural.
