

Moral Framework

April 24, 2010

By their comprehensive brevity and divine promulgation, God's ten Commandments (Deut.V, 6–21) are the outstanding presentation of that natural law known to every man through his natural conscience, and which he denies or defies at his peril. Last week's "Eleison Comments" claimed that this law makes easy a diagnosis of the ills of modern art. Actually it diagnoses a multitude of modern problems, but let us this week look at the structure of the ten Commandments, as analyzed by St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 2ae, 100, art.6 and 7.

Law is the ordering of a community by its leader. Natural law is God's ordering of the community of men with himself, of himself with men. Of this community God himself is the centre and main purpose, so the first "table of the Law" lays out men's duties to God (C.1, no idols, C.2 no blasphemy, C.3 keep the Sabbath), while the second table (C. 4–10) details men's duties to their fellow-men.

The first three Commandments represent the duties of loyalty, respect and service in that order. For just as for a soldier in an army, says St.Thomas, disloyalty to his general, or treachery, is worse than disrespect, which is worse than a failure to serve him, so a man towards God must firstly have no other gods (C.1), secondly in no way insult him or his name (C.2), and thirdly render him the service he requests (C.3).

As for the duties of a man towards his fellow-men (C.4–10), of primary importance are his relations with the father and mother who gave him life. Therefore the second table of the Law is headed by the duty to honour one's parents (C.4). So basic is this honour to all human society that without it society falls to pieces, as we see happening all around us today with "Western civilization" (which would better be

termed “Western disintegration”).

The remaining six Commandments St. Thomas continues to analyze as being in descending order of importance. Harm to neighbour in action (C.5–7) is worse than merely in word (C.8) which is worse than only in thought (C.9–10). As for harm in action, harm to a neighbour’s person (C.5, no killing) is graver than to his family (C.6, no adultery), which in turn is graver than to his mere property (C.7, no stealing). Harmful actions in word (C.8, no lying) are worse than harm in mere thought, where again envy of his marriage or family (C.9, no concupiscence of the flesh) is graver than envy of his mere property (C.10, no concupiscence of the eyes).

However, the breaking of all ten Commandments involves pride – the ancient Greeks called it “hubris” – whereby I rise up against God’s order, against God. For the Greeks, hubris was the key to man’s downfall. For us today, a universal pride is the key to the modern world’s appalling problems, insoluble without God, which means, ever since the Incarnation, without Our Lord Jesus Christ. Sacred Heart of Jesus, save us!

Kyrie eleison.