

## Assistant Pastor's Column

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### Holiness and Law

#### *The Moral Life Requires Conformity to the Rule of Reason*

To be free, the modern mind says, one has to be detached from any standpoint. After all, if I decide to do one thing or another just because someone or something has told me it is good, then I am not free, says the modern philosopher; rather, I am like a child who is immature and does only what he is told because he is told.

The spontaneous response of the honest mind – that such thinking is nonsense – should be trusted. We have often seen the aberrations which arise when someone exercises this type of “freedom.” For example, let us start within our own Church: how many priests ridicule the “rules” of the Church’s rubrics on how the Mass is to be celebrated, and they do so under the flag of a more “mature,” “grown-up,” or “creative community experience.” And how many TV shows demonstrate heroes who break the laws, often very important ones at that, to achieve and end that they think is good.

Living with no reference point is not maturity, nor is it freedom; it is insanity. It is insanity, because the agent (the one doing the action in question) simply renounces the use of reason. For there are principles which should guide our actions, and they are principles of reason; they are called laws.

There are **five kinds of laws**, and each of them is nothing more than what reason assembles as a guide, a structure, within which to act. That’s why St. Thomas Aquinas calls law the dictate of reason, says it is universal meaning applicable in many cases, and it is ordained to the good (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-IIae q. 90 ff.). One could say that every law has these four aspects: that it is 1. the rule or measure of right reason 2. regarding human acts 3. promulgated by the true authority and 4. directed towards the common good.

The five kinds of laws are these.

**Eternal law.** This is the government of divine providence, whose reason holds within itself everything in the entire universe, visible and invisible. Since it is within God’s reason, it is therefore “eternal.”

**Natural law.** This is the participation of eternal law which rational creatures (angels and men) enjoy. The light of God’s reason shines in man’s conscience to enable him to discern what is good and what is evil.

**Human law.** This is the group of particular dispositions established by men, and should enjoy all the qualities of law; therefore an objectively unjust law therefore has no force of law.

**Divine law.** This is that rule or measure of God’s reason which has been revealed to man and promulgated by God. Examples are the observance of the Sabbath, or Jesus’ mandate “do this in memory of me.”

**The law of sin.** Different from the other four, this does not mean that anyone’s reason, God’s or man’s, obliges us to sin. It means that there is an impetus towards sin left in us, because of original sin and

impounded by our own actual sins, and that it exists as a punishment of sin. It is a “law” only obliquely, because of its coercion, because it comes as a just punishment. We don’t obey it by falling into sin; we obey it by carrying our cross with humility, and doing much penance to purify ourselves from our habits of sin.

The moral life, if it is to be perfect, must therefore embrace law, become one with law; for the man who observes the law observes reason; and the man who observes reason lives according to spirit and not slave to his flesh.



Michelangelo, *Moses*, 1545. San Pietro in Vincoli (St. Peter in Chains), Rome. Intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II in St. Peter’s Basilica; commissioned to Michelangelo in 1505. Moses carries the book, as he is the prophet of the law of the Old Testament.