

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
The "Catholic" Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I have always admired Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. The doctrine he teaches is classic, philosophical wisdom. King sought to defend the sit-ins and civil disobedience that were necessary to prod city authorities into action for civil rights. The question he had to answer was, "How can you justify breaking the law?"

King's answer resonates with all men of good sense. Citing the Catholic St. Augustine he wrote, "An unjust law is no law at all." Now what did he mean? King appealed to the traditional distinction between natural law and human law. The one reflects the moral demands of our nature - as rational, free beings - and the other refers to statutes crafted by human authority. To explain the relation of the one to the other, King cited St. Thomas Aquinas:

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.

King appealed not just to Catholic authorities, but to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and to the Protestants Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Martin Luther. Indeed, every rational soul, Catholic or not, should grasp the distinction between natural and human law. But the doctrine of natural law is a point of particular emphasis for Catholics, and fundamental to our view of God and the world. God made the world good, and endowed the human person with reason and freedom. He calls mankind to embrace the good knowable by reason and demanded by our nature.

When it comes to civil rights, the point should be obvious. Any law that degrades the human person, denying his intrinsic dignity, rationality, or freedom is by definition an unjust law. But King knew that the point was not always obvious. So, his other aim was to exhort fellow Christians, white Christians, to embrace the doctrine. It troubled him that men of good will and Christian conviction could sit passively and tolerate injustice. He recognized that the privileged set rarely gives up its power voluntarily, however just the claims of the aggrieved. Hence, the necessity of civil disobedience - to prod the responsible parties into action.

As Catholics, we can fully embrace King's philosophical vision of human equality and natural law, and even his call to civil disobedience. The Second Vatican Council addressed the need for opposition to unjust laws in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*:

But where citizens are oppressed by a public authority overstepping its competence, they should not protest against those things which are objectively required for the common good; but it is legitimate for them to defend their own rights and the rights of their fellow citizens against the abuse of this authority, while keeping within those limits drawn by the natural law and the Gospels.

Since the early days of the civil rights movement, America has made important strides towards the natural law ideal of our founding charter: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all

men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." In spite of this progress, I believe the doctrine and example of Martin Luther King, Jr. have never been more necessary than they are today.

As I see it, the greatest civil rights challenge to the future of America and the West is the denial of natural law. Pope Benedict has referred to this danger again and again throughout his pontificate. In his most recent Christmas address to the Roman Curia, for example, he warned, "it is now becoming clear that the very notion of being – of what being human really means – is being called into question." Speaking to the German Parliament in 2011, Pope Benedict explained:

Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled.

Unfortunately, public discourse in America increasingly ignores these truths. Instead, interested parties reframe critical issues in terms of feelings, personal preferences, and moral ambiguity. In sum, they redefine the human person not as nature, reason, and will - but as just will. (If you don't believe me, check out Planned Parenthood's ad campaign entitled "Moving Beyond Pro-life vs. Pro-Choice Labels.") Even the question of race relations can be reduced to a mere tribalism, to the practical need to balance the power interests of competing groups, rather than to the universal, moral norms grounded in our common humanity and accessible to reason.

In celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. day, I would urge Catholics and all people of good will to reflect again on the *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. In this life, we will never be free of political conflict, competing interests, and the dangers of mere majoritarian rule. However, if we reduce the human person to mere will, to preference, or to inclination, then we have no hope of resolving conflict but by force. But King himself proved that the non-violent appeal to conscience, to reason, and to natural law *can work*. It works because it reflects the truth of the human person - Catholic or not.