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Is There Law in Heaven?

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By Amy Uelmen

Law may not leap to mind as fertile ground for fostering a culture of communion. From jokes and movies to so much other popular culture, it is clear that lawyers often top the list of those most suspect for not fostering a culture of communion. This may be because lawyers are often in a position to manipulate relationships of power for their own selfish interests, or those of their clients. But I think it is also because we have a hard time seeing how the law itself can fit into anything having to do with communion and with love.

When I ask friends whether there will be laws in heaven, they say of course not! When people refuse to love, they must be forced to follow the rules, or punished for not following them, and that is where the law steps in. So in heaven, law should be completely unnecessary.

I think there is another way of understanding law, drawn from the spirituality of unity. In one of her writings, Chiara Lubich describes Jesus as a “divine immigrant.” He became man, adapted to living in the world, learned a language, and grew up with the customs of his time. But he also brought a gift for humanity. He brought the customs and culture of heaven, so that humanity could live according to a new order, according to the law of heaven, which is love.

In fact, when Jesus wanted to sum up his teaching, he said, “I give you a new commandment, love one another as I have loved you.” This was not a recommendation or suggestion — it was his law. As the Second Vatican Council document Gaudium et Spes states, the Word “taught us that the new command of love was the basic law of human perfection and hence of the world’s transformation.”

But what happens when we move beyond the internal life of the Christian community? After all, you cannot force people to love. If we did, it would not be love anymore.

During my first year of law school, one of my Focolare friends was in the midst of a building project, and there was a decision to be made about the width between the rails of a porch. As a law student, the first question in my mind was how to protect the movement from liability. But I saw my friend was interested in the rules about the space between the rails not because she was afraid of a lawsuit, but because those rules might help prevent a toddler from getting her head stuck. What drove her was not fear of punishment but her desire to love more. Love was a light that helped her to see the rules in a completely different way.

And this is where I think the two worlds come together — the law is not the last resort; law does not begin only where love ends. Instead, another way of looking at law is as a helpful guide for knowing how to love, and how to love more. This perspective changed the way I saw hundreds of interactions with the law. Speed limits, red lights, and parking rules were no longer annoying interferences with my personal freedom, but ways to understand how to love as I moved about the city.

After law school, I worked for five years doing trial work at a large law firm. The clients were mostly large businesses. Was there any room for this kind of perspective? As the Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman famously put it, “the only social responsibility of business is to make a profit.” One interpretation of the role of the corporate trustees is to make sure that the business — within legal limits, of course — makes as much money for the shareholders as it can.

Over the course of my work, this sense of the law as a helpful guide to love gave me a different vision. I found myself asking, how do we measure profit — short term or long? Beyond a myopic focus on quarterly profits, what comes into view is how business entities function and generate profits in the context of relationships internally, with employees, directors and stockholders, and externally with consumers and the public at large. In this wider lens, I could see how businesses must, and do, consider the impact of their decisions on each of the relationships on which they depend. It makes sense that cultivating all these relationships leads to a healthier and even more profitable business. I saw the rule of the lawyer as highlighting the ways in which the law expresses the nature of these relationships, and how they apply to everyday business decisions.

In my work at Fordham Law School, I see that many students view the legal profession as divided in two camps. On the good side, public interest lawyers crusade for any number of causes that further justice, equality and human rights. On the bad side, lawyers from large law firms pursue the generally greedy, profit-seeking agenda of large businesses. If I do not dedicate my career to public service, I am doomed to work, at least initially, in a job that requires me to sacrifice my commitment to justice. While this mindset may encourage some students to plunge into legal careers in the public interest, the dilemma is that it can also lead students to believe that there is an ethics-free zone, where unrestricted pursuit of profit reigns, and where there is no room for a delicate conscience.

Fostering a culture of communion is a hopeful answer to this dilemma. It suggests that we can make a difference not so much because of our job description but because we bring to whatever we are doing a new perspective, a vision of how the elements of our society can come together in communion. In this way we can begin to see all areas of social and professional life as fair and game for bringing the light of love to bear on our everyday decisions.

Is there law in heaven? I think so. Are there lawyers in heaven? I hope so! But in any case, here on earth our efforts to foster a culture of communion can help us to discover how the law can also be a path to love.

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What justice fully entails

In March 2008 I participated in a seminar of U.S. lawyers and law professors held in the Focolare city of Loppiano, near Florence, Italy. There I held a lecture on the spirituality of love, and I learned for the first time what justice fully means and entails.

From my legal studies, I had understood that justice was primarily procedural — for example, simply affording a person the right to be heard before canceling his unemployment benefits. I also appreciated the more “substantive” definitions of justice, but these affirmations often seemed to create a certain tension between the freedom of the individual and the involvement of the larger community. In Loppiano, I encountered for the first time both a conception and practice of justice that resolves this tension. For example, the Economy of Communion industrial park. I was amazed to hear that the articles of incorporation of a company there provided for 30% of its profits being invested toward creating work for others in the community and around the world. Loppiano helped me to see how justice, in the fullest sense, includes the positive work of the larger community to foster each person’s growth by walking together and sharing the other’s burdens. As Pope Benedict wrote in Deus Caritas Est, “Justice is love in action.”

Gregory Louis graduated from Fordham Law School last month.