

**SIMONE WEIL**

**PROFESSION OF FAITH**

**STUDY FOR A DECLARATION OF  
HUMAN OBLIGATIONS**

Translated by Sylvia María Valls



**INSTITUTO SIMONE WEIL** *ediciones*



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HUMAN OBLIGATIONS**

*Simone Weil*<sup>1</sup>

There is a reality to be found beyond this world, beyond space and time, beyond man's mental universe, beyond every territory that human faculties are able to penetrate.

To this reality corresponds, at the center of man's heart, a quest for an absolute good that is always there and which never finds an object in this world.

This reality is also revealed down here by the absurdities, the insoluble contradictions that human thought encounters whenever it moves exclusively in this world.

Just as the reality of this world is the only foundation for facts, so is the other reality the only foundation for the good.

It is from it and from it alone that there comes into this world all the good that is bound to exist; all the beauty, all the truth, all the justice, all the legitimacy, all the order, all subordination of human

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the French original by Sylvia María Valls. Instituto Simone Weil, A.C. Valle de Bravo, Mexico. Latest revision: January, 2014.

conduct to obligations.

The only intermediary through which the good is able to descend from its realm to that of human beings are those, among them, who maintain their attention and their love turned towards that other reality.

Even though it is beyond the reach of all human faculties, man has the power to turn his attention and love in its direction.

No one is to allow himself to suppose, ever, that anyone, no matter who, is deprived of this power.

This power down here is not real except to the extent that it is exercised. The sole condition for it to be exercised is consent.

This consent may be formulated. It may also not be so, not even appear clearly to one's conscience, even while taking place in the soul. Often it does not in fact take place even when it is expressed through language. Formulated or not, the only sufficient condition is that in fact it take place.

To whosoever consents in fact to focus his attention and love outside of this world towards the reality that is located beyond all human faculties, accessing this reality is a given. In this case, sooner or later, a good descends into him that shines, through him, to all his surroundings.

The demand for absolute good that resides at the center of the heart, and the power, be it virtual, of turning one's attention and love beyond this world and to receive from it a portion of that good, form a link that binds together each man without exception to the other reality.

Whosoever recognizes that other reality also recognizes that link.

Because of it, s/ he considers any human being without exception as something sacred to which one must show respect.

No other possible mobile exists for the universal respect of all human beings. Whatever the formula of belief or disbelief one may have chosen, s/he whose heart is inclined to practice that respect recognizes, in deed, the other reality beyond this world. To whosoever that respect is foreign, to him the other reality also is foreign.

The reality of this world is made up of differences. Unequal objects unequally demand attention. A certain play of circumstances or a certain attraction gathers attention around the person of some human beings. Due to different circumstances and to a certain lack of attraction, others remain anonymous. They escape attention or, when attention is directed towards them, it does not distinguish anything other than the traits of a collectivity.

The attention that inhabits this world is entirely subservient to the effects of these inequalities and can avoid them even less as long as it fails to perceive them.

In view of such inequalities, respect towards all beings cannot be the same as long as it is not directed towards something that is identical in all.

Human beings are different in all the relations that link them to the things of this world, without any exception. There is nothing identical in them other than the presence of a link with that other reality.

All human beings are identical to the extent that they may be thought of as constituted by a central demand for the good around which the psychic and carnal material is arranged.

The attention directed beyond this world alone is in contact, in fact, with the essential structure of human nature. Only it has the ever-identical faculty of projecting light upon a being whosoever s/he may be.

Whosoever has this faculty also has, in fact, their attention directed beyond this world, whether s/he be aware of it or not.

The link that ties each human being to the other reality is, like that other reality, out of the reach of all human faculties. The respect rooted in this link from the moment when it is recognized, cannot be manifested.

That respect cannot find any kind of direct expression here below. If it is not expressed, it does not exist. There is a possibility of indirect expression for it.

The respect inspired by man's link with the reality that is alien to this world is manifested to that part of the human being that is situated in this world.

The reality of this world is necessity. The part of a being that is locked into it is the part that is abandoned to necessity and submerged in the misery that it provokes.

Only one possibility of indirect expression exists for this respect one feels for human beings; this possibility is given to us by the needs of human beings in this world –the earthly needs of the soul and of the body.

What lies at the root of this possibility is a contact established in human nature between the need for the good, which is the essence of a

human being, and sensibility. Nothing ever authorizes anyone to think of any man [or woman] that this link does not exist in him.

Thanks to this contact, when, as a result of omissions from the part of other men, the life of a human being is destroyed or mutilated by a wound or a privation either of the soul or of the body, it is not only the sensibility in him that suffers the blow but also his aspiration towards the good. Then, there has been a sacrilege committed against what in a human being is sacred.

Sensibility may, to the contrary, be the only thing affected were the person to suffer a privation or a wound due exclusively to the mechanisms of natural forces, or should he realize that those who apparently are inflicting this privation, far from wishing him any harm are merely submitting to something he himself recognizes as necessary.

The possibility of an indirect expression of respect towards a human being is the foundation for the obligation. The obligation has as its object the earthly needs of the soul and of the body of human beings whosoever these beings may be. Each need has a corresponding obligation. Each obligation responds to a need. There is no other type of obligation relative to human affairs. If one thinks that one sees other, either they are false or it is because of some error that they have not been classified under this category.

Whosoever in fact has his attention and love directed to the reality that is alien to this world recognizes, at the same time, that s/he is constrained, pending the scale of his responsibilities and considering his power, in public and in private life, by the unique and perpetual duty of remedying all the privations of the soul and of the body that are bound to destroy or to mutilate the earthly life of a human being whosoever s/he may be.

The limit established by the frontiers of power and by the level of

responsibilities is not legitimate unless everything possible has been done in order to make the need of imposing that limit known to those who suffer its consequences, without any lies and in such a way that they may arrive at consenting to recognize it.

No event or circumstance ever saves anyone from this universal obligation. The circumstances that appear to excuse one in relation to a man or to a category of men only imposes it more absolutely.

The thought of this obligation circulates among all men very differently and in very uneven degrees of clarity. Human beings are more or less prone to consent or to refuse adopting it as a rule of conduct.

Consent is more often than not mixed with falsehood. When there is no lie involved, practice is not without weaknesses. Refusal makes one fall into crime.

The proportion of good and evil in a society depends, on the one hand, of the proportion of consent and the proportion of refusal, and, on the other, of the distribution of power between those who consent and those who refuse.

All power, whatever its nature, left in the hands of someone who has not given to this obligation a clear consent, totally and without lies, is wrongly placed.

As pertains to a man who has chosen to refuse this obligation, the exercise of a function, be it large or small, public or private, that leaves in his hands human destinies, constitutes in itself a criminal action. All those who, well knowing his mind, authorize him to exercise such a function, are accomplices.

Any state whose official doctrine constitutes a provocation to

crime has placed itself, in its entirety, within the sphere of crime. It lacks even the slightest trace of legitimacy.

Any system of laws is lacking in the very essence of what constitutes the law when nothing in it has been anticipated in order to prevent such a crime. A system of laws that provides measures in order to prevent some aspects of this crime, but not others, possesses only partially the character of law.

Any government whose members commit this crime or authorize it among those below them is a traitor to its function.

No matter what kind of collectivity, of institution, of a collective sort of life, whose normal functioning implies or involves the practice of such a crime, thereby suffers from a lack of legitimacy, and is subject to reform or suspension.

A man becomes an accomplice to this crime if, having a large, small or minimal part in shaping public opinion, he refrains from condemning it whenever he comes into knowledge of it or if he sometimes refuses such knowledge in order not to find himself having to condemn it.

A country is not innocent of this crime if public opinion, being free to express itself, does not blame the existence of its practice or if - freedom of expression having been suppressed- the opinions that circulate clandestinely do not contain this accusation.

The purpose of public life is to put the greatest amount of power possible into the hands of those who in fact consent to being bound by the obligation that ties every man to other human beings and who are knowledgeable in this respect.

The law is the sum total of permanent dispositions prone to have

such a result.

Knowledge of the obligation is two-fold. It includes knowledge of the principle and knowledge of the application.

Since the realm of obligation is constituted by human needs in this world, it falls upon intelligence to conceive the notion of need and to discern, distinguish and draw the list of the earthly needs of body and soul.

This study remains subject to revision.

## Presentation of the obligations

In order to conceive concretely one's obligations towards human beings and to subdivide it into several obligations, it is enough to conceive the earthly needs of the body and of the soul. Each need is the object of an obligation.

The needs of a human being are sacred. Their satisfaction cannot be subordinated to reasons of State nor to any consideration such as money, nationality, race, color, nor in relation to the moral value or to any other attribute of the person under consideration, nor to any conditioning of any kind.

The only legitimate limitation to the satisfaction of the needs of a specific human being is the one established by the needs and wants of other human beings. The limit is not legitimate unless the wants of all human beings receive the same level of attention.

The fundamental obligation towards human being is subdivided into several concrete obligations that enlist the essential needs of the human creature. Each need is the object of an obligation. Each

obligation has a need as its object.

Only the earthly needs are involved since those are the only ones that a human being can satisfy. The needs of the soul are involved as much as those of the body. The soul has its needs and when they are not satisfied finds itself in a state akin to that of a hungry and mutilated body.

*The human body is above all in need of food, warmth, sleep, hygiene, rest, exercise, clean air.*

The needs of the soul can in their majority be ordered into pairs that balance and complete one another.

*The human soul needs equality and hierarchy.*

Equality is the public recognition, wholesomely expressed in the institutions and customs, of the principle that establishes that an even level of attention is owed to the needs of all human beings. The hierarchy is the scale of responsibilities. Since attention has the tendency of directing itself and lingering at the heights, special dispositions become necessary so that equality and hierarchy become in fact compatible.

*The human soul has a need for consented obedience and for freedom.*

Consented obedience is the obedience that is given to an authority because one feels this authority to be legitimate. It is not possible through a *coup d'état* nor in relation to an economic power of which money is the cornerstone. Freedom is the power to choose within the margin allowed by the direct constrictions of the power that nature sways and those of an authority accepted as legitimate. The margin

should be sufficiently wide so that freedom does not appear like some piece of fiction, but understood exclusively in relation to innocent things so that certain forms of crime will never be considered lawful.

*The human soul is in need of truth and of freedom of expression.*

The need for truth demands that all have access to the culture of the mind without having to suffer either a material or moral transplant. It demands that no material or moral pressure be applied in the realm of thought proceeding from an intention that is alien to an exclusive preoccupation with truth –something which implies the absolute prohibition of all propaganda without exception. It demands protection against error and lies, something that turns into a reprehensible fault all material lies that can be publicly avoided. It demands for public health to be protected from poisons in the field of thought.

But, in order to exercise itself, intelligence needs to be able to express itself without any authority setting limits. Hence, a space for independent intellectual investigation must be left open within reach of all and where no authority will interfere.

*The human soul needs, on the one hand, isolation and intimacy, on the other, social life.*

*The human soul needs personal and collective property.*

Personal property is never made up of a sum of money but by the appropriation of concrete objects such as a house, field, furnishings and utensils that the soul contemplates as an extension of itself and of its body. Justice demands that personal property, thus understood, be as inalienable as freedom is.

Collective property is not defined by a legal title but by a

certain feeling within a human milieu that contemplates certain material objects as a prolongation or a crystallization of itself. This feeling is made possible by certain objective conditions.

The existence of a social class defined by the absence of personal and collective property is as shameful as is slavery.

*The human soul needs punishment and honor.*

Every human being who, through crime, has placed him/herself outside the good needs to be reintegrated to the good through suffering. Suffering should be inflicted with a view to directing the soul to recognizing, freely, someday, that it has been justly inflicted. This reintegration to the good is what punishment is. Every innocent human being, or one who has finished expiating his crime, needs for his/her honor to be recognized just as everyone else's is.

*The human soul needs disciplined participation in a common task of public interest, and personal initiative in that participation.*

*The human soul needs security and risk.*

Fear of violence, of hunger, or of any other extreme hardship, constitutes a sickness of the soul. Boredom resulting from the absence of all risk is also a sickness of the soul.

*The human soul needs above all to feel rooted in various natural milieus and to communicate with the universe through them.*

The homeland, milieus defined by language, by culture, by a common historical past, by the profession, the locality, are examples of natural environments. Everything that results in the uprooting of a human being or which has the effect of preventing him from growing roots is

criminal.

The criteria allowing one to recognize that in a certain place the needs of human beings are being satisfied is an expansion or amplification of fraternity, joy, beauty and happiness. Wherever withdrawal, sadness, ugliness prevail, there are privations waiting to be healed.

## Practical application

For this declaration to become a practical inspiration in the life of the country, the first requirement is that it be adopted with this intention by the people. The second requirement is that anyone who exercises power or wishes to exercise a power, no matter of what nature – political, administrative, spiritual or other—be required to commit himself to taking it as his practical rule of conduct.

In this case, the uniform nature of the obligation is to some extent modified by the particular responsibilities that a specific power implies. This is why the formula for assuming commitment would have to add the phrase "...paying the most special attention to those human beings who depend on me."

The violation of such a commitment by either word or deed must always remain exposed to receiving punishment. But the emergence of institutions and customs that will allow for such punishment to take place in the majority of cases requires several generations.

Assenting to this declaration implies a continuous effort to bring about as soon as possible the emergence of said institutions and customs.



**T**he Instituto Simone Weil, a civil association founded in Valle de Bravo, Mexico, in 1986, promotes the study and critical analysis of Simone Weil’s legacy (1909-1943) in the hope of stimulating the creation of positive outlooks, instruments and institutions better able to look after the satisfaction of the true “earthly needs of body and soul,” part of a proactive response to the genial and humanistic inspiration of the French philosopher.

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**S**imone Weil wrote this text in 1943, shortly before her death, originally entitled *Prelude to a Declaration of Human Obligations*. It is considered her main contribution to the eventual reconstruction of France and followed from a request by the French Resistance National Counsel in London whose leaders, however, failed to pay any attention. It is the subtitle and the central essay of her great work *The Need for Roots*. Reaching back for inspiration to the kind of social organization she believed to have existed in Provence during the XIII th. C., this writing reflects –as she expressed it–the “practical inspiration for the life of a country” once it is accepted by the people and their government.