There is an argument going on in the Church about the human conscience and moral decision-making. It is an old argument, although it has not diminished over the centuries. In recent decades it seems as contentious as ever. Pope John Paul II addressed the problem of conscience in his 1993 encyclical “Veritatis Splendor”.

"[A] new situation has come about within the Christian community itself, which has experienced the spread of numerous doubts and objections of a human and psychological, social and cultural, religious and even properly theological nature, with regard to the Church's moral teachings. It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions. At the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth. ... [C]ertain of the Church's moral teachings are found simply unacceptable; and the Magisterium itself is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to "exhort consciences" and to "propose values", in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices."¹

John Paul was alarmed by the rejection of some of the Church's moral teachings. He believed that the problem was related more generally to an over-emphasis on the subjective judgments of conscience vis-à-vis the objective norms of Church teaching. The encyclical, not unexpectedly did not settle the argument: “There seems to be an emphasis with Veritatis Splendor on the suppression of conscience” wrote one theologian, “and a move of power toward the Magisterium.”²

The tension over the role of conscience in the Catholic Church originates from its own understanding and teaching about conscience. The teaching is summarized in the

Catechism in Article 6 of the chapter on The Dignity of the Human Person:

IN BRIEF

1795 “Conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (GS 16).

1796 Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.

1797 For the man who has committed evil, the verdict of his conscience remains a pledge of conversion and of hope.

1798 A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. Everyone must avail himself of the means to form his conscience.

1799 Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them.

1800 A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience.

1801 Conscience can remain in ignorance or make erroneous judgments. Such ignorance and errors are not always free of guilt.

1802 The Word of God is a light for our path. We must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. This is how moral conscience is formed.3

The importance of conscience is born out in sections 1795 and 1800. Here we are told that one is alone with God in his conscience and thus, when one’s conscience is certain, it must be obeyed.

The nature of conscience is noted in sections 1796, 1798, and 1801. In these sections we are taught that conscience is a judgment of reason, must be formed, and may none-the-less be either ignorant of the truth or in error.

The tension about conscience is alluded to in section 1799, when we are told that a good conscience judges in accordance with reason and the divine law. The perennial problem arises when one’s reason and divine law seem to be at odds. This typically happens when the divine law isn’t clear or is open to interpretation. When this happens, it is usually the case that an individual’s seemingly correct conscience is at odds with Church teaching.

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Although it is unlikely that the tension and the arguments surrounding some issues of conscience will ever be resolved, I argue that the way forward is contained in sections 1797 and 1802, which reframe the arguments over conscience in a pastoral context. In these sections we are reminded of two very important and pastoral truths: first, that the verdict of a bad conscience remains “a pledge of conversion and of hope”, and second that truth does not always come as an epiphany but is something we must “assimilate in faith and prayer and put it into practice”. In fact, “conversion and hope”, “faith and prayer”, and “putting into practice” are strong indications that our approach to conscience should move away from discussions of reason and authority into vocation and spirituality. It is in this context that the Church can help one form his conscience through a life of prayer, by developing the firm habits of virtue, and by taking up one’s cross and following Christ.

What is conscience? The dictionary defines it as: a) the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one’s own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good; b) a faculty, power, or principle enjoining good acts; c) the part of the superego in psychoanalysis that transmits commands and admonitions to the ego.  

Experts in human development tell us that conscience:

- sustains moral functioning without external intervention,
- motivates good behavior,
- discourages or punishes bad behavior,
- includes a reference to a prototype of moral behavior derived from the lessons of one’s life experiences, role models, and socialization,
- when adequately developed the various features of conscience are expressed as behavioral self-regulation.

Although conscience is described in behavioral or psychological terms, there is little in these definitions and discussions that seem to involve modern neuroscience; rather, they are

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simply restatements of a human attribute recognized long ago by philosophers and theologians.

A theological understanding of conscience is given by Grisez and Shaw:

“Most fundamentally, conscience is one’s awareness of moral truth – of that which is truly right and good to do. Not what superego causes one to feel nervous or at ease about, not what it takes to win and retain approval from a group, not what one happens to crave just now, but what is truly right and good. … One makes a judgment about truth which should shape ones’ choice. This, basically, is conscience.

The forbidden and the permitted are not the basic categories for conscience, nor is mature conscience concerned with how little one must do in order to get by or how far one can go without being called to account. These are immature preoccupations of legalism. For mature consciences, the fundamental question is: What is the good and wise thing to do? And for mature Christian consciences: What is the wise and holy thing to do?”

So we have similar views of conscience, which differ primarily on one’s basic outlook: theological or spiritual versus clinical or psychological and, therefore, on the norms or the standards which are the basis for the formation or development of the conscience.

It is also noteworthy conscience is not define with reference to the neurosciences. It a human phenomenon that defies rigorous characterization. There may be general agreement about the nature of conscience, but the concept, the idea, has never had a precise and standard definition that fully satisfied everyone.

The English word “conscience” comes from the Latin word "conscientia" which has two meanings. The first is “consciouness, knowledge in oneself”, especially “consciouness of right and wrong”. The second is “a joint knowledge with some other person, being privy to.” The corresponding Greek term is “syneidesis," which carries the two Latin meanings and a more general meaning of conscientiousness.”

In the play Orestes by Euripides (480-406 BCE), after Orestes has killed his mother

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to avenge his father’s murder, he is asked by Menelaus "What ails thee? What is thy deadly sickness?" Orestes replies, "My conscience (syneidesis); I know that I am guilty of an awful crime." This passage illustrates the early use of the term to mean a bad or guilty conscience. The effect of a bad conscience was pain, but a pain that Plutarch says is implanted in the soul as remorse which cannot, like other pains, be reasoned away.

Aristotle never used the word syneidesis and Plato used it only once – also in the sense of a bad conscience. Both Aristotle and Plato used the terms wisdom and prudence, in the sense of good judgment and practical wisdom, in ways that we would use the word conscience today. For Plato wisdom was a kind of knowledge which allowed one to conduct his affairs with good judgment. For Aristotle, prudence or practical wisdom was the ability to determine what behaviors and attitudes were necessary for happiness. They used these terms for what we now consider to be the guiding function of conscience.

Stoic philosophers seem to have used syneidesis in the sense of one’s conscience standing guard over one’s behavior. This use of the term implies a more positive and guiding role for the conscience. An example of this sense comes from a fragment which has been attributed to Epictetus, although that attribution is in doubt:

“When we were children, our parents handed us over to a nursery-slave who should watch over us everywhere lest harm befall us. But when we are grown up, God hands us over to the syneidesis implanted in us, to protect us. Let us not in any way despise its protection, for should we do so, we shall be both ill-pleasing to God and have our own syneidos as an enemy.”

Costigaine notes that this understanding makes conscience something omniscient and vigilant which is implanted in us to protect us. Like the nursery-slave, its role is to

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11 Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, p. 40
12 Ibid., p. 41
13 Costigane, *A History of the Western Idea of Conscience*, p. 4
guard, but not to teach. She also notes that the metaphor also suggests that conscience must be developed and does not fully develop until adulthood.\textsuperscript{14} This Stoic understanding of conscience as including some kind of principle external to the individual was apparently uncommon the Greek and Roman conceptions of conscience.

Returning to the Latin, Cicero used the word \textit{conscientia} in an exclusively moral sense – in both the sense of a bad conscience which brings guilt and a good conscience which brings peace:\textsuperscript{15}

- But what can wickedness contribute towards lessening the annoyances of life, commensurate with its effect in increasing them, owing to the burden of a guilty conscience, the penalties of the law and the hatred of one’s fellows? (About the Ends of Goods and Evils, Book I, XVI. / De Finibus, Bonorum et Malorum, Liber Primus)\textsuperscript{16}
- because it is most delightful to have the consciousness of a life well spent and the memory of many deeds worthily performed. (Cato the Elder on Old Age / De Senectute)\textsuperscript{17}

In marked contrast to the Greeks and Latin writers is the Old Testament view of conscience. While the Jewish writers of the Old Testament did not have a word for conscience, their use of the word “heart” is often very closely related to the notion of conscience. Yet unlike the Greek and Latin writers they did not use it in the sense of a subjective and probing moral self-reflection. The heart was not simply a wise and reasoned faculty which guided one toward happiness and condemned one when one failed. For the Jews the heart was place where they were judged on their obedience to the divine law and the covenant, and the place where one’s relationship with God was manifested. The self-reproach of conscience was born out of unfaithfulness to this relationship:

\begin{verbatim}
1 Kings, 8\textsuperscript{(18)}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 5
\textsuperscript{15} Hogan, \textit{Confronting the Truth : Conscience in the Catholic Tradition}, p. 42
\textsuperscript{18} All the scripture passages used in this paper are taken from: \textit{The New American Bible : Translated from the Original Languages with Critical use of all the Ancient Sources : Including the Revised New Testament and the Revised Psalms} (New York: Catholic Book Pub. Co, 1992), 436.
You who alone know the hearts of all men, render to each one of them according to his conduct; knowing their hearts, so treat them that they may fear you as long as they live on the land you gave our fathers.

Psalm 119

1 Happy those whose way is blameless, who walk by the teaching of the LORD.  
2 Happy those who observe God's decrees, who seek the LORD with all their heart.  
3 They do no wrong; they walk in God's ways.

What mattered, however, was not simply exterior conformity to the law, but the desire to interiorize the law in the heart:19

Job 27

6 My justice I maintain and I will not relinquish it; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.

For the Jews, heart was not only the place where one's actions were judged in conformity with the law and the covenant, but the place in one's inmost being where one encountered God, for it was there that God probed them, knew them, and instructed and guided them them.

Psalm 139

1 O LORD, you have probed me, you know me:  
2 you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.  
23 Probe me, God, know my heart; try me, know my concerns.  
24 See if my way is crooked, then lead me in the ancient paths.

Jeremiah, 31

33 But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The New Testament authors, often Jews who wrote in Greek, synthesized the Greek and Old Testament understandings of conscience. Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this synthesis is from Paul's letter to the Romans:

12 All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it, and all who sin under the law will be judged in accordance with it. 13 For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified. 14 For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are

19 Hogan, Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition, p. 46-47
a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:12-16)

Paul speaks of both the law written on the heart and of the conscience that judges or accuses. Even for the gentile, the judgment of conscience is not just personal, but has both has both a subjective and an objective aspects.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul makes a distinction between the heart and the conscience. He notes that he may have a clear conscience, but may still not have acted or spoken morally. The conscience, in Paul's understanding, is not the final judge:

4 I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord. 5 Therefore, do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes, for he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will manifest the motives of our hearts, and then everyone will receive praise from God. (1 Corinthians 4:4-5)

So at the very beginning of Christianity we find this tension between the subjective and the objective aspects of conscience. We have have a law written in our hearts which is not our own. We also have reason or conscience, which tries to understand and apply that law. Yet there is no guarantee that everyone will come to the same judgment of conscience on a particular issue or that our judgment will reflect God's judgment.

Paul's separation of the conscience and the heart is interesting because of the human anthropology he mentions in his first letter to the Thessalonians:

23 May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Paul probably thought of the spirit as residing in the heart, which is of course, is the place where the Old Testament writers place the human encounter with God: the human spirit with God's spirit. The soul, in his anthropology, was probably the place where the rational

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20 Ibid., p. 51
21 Costigane, A History of the Western Idea of Conscience, p. 8
faculty resides. and therefore, where the conscience resides. 22 This anthropology may be quite useful in dealing with the tensions created by the Christian understanding of conscience, but that will have to wait until this historical review is finished.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul talks about conscience seven times, more than in any other of his letters. In eighth chapter is Paul's discussion of the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols and it is one of the more intriguing passages on conscience in the New Testament. His discussion is with those who possess the insight that eating meat sacrificed to the idols of nonexistent gods is not sinful and how they should relate to recent converts who don’t yet have that same insight:

7 But not all have this knowledge. There are some who have been so used to idolatry up until now that, when they eat meat sacrificed to idols, their conscience, which is weak, is defiled. ... 10 If someone sees you, with your knowledge, reclining at table in the temple of an idol, may not his conscience too, weak as it is, be "built up" to eat the meat sacrificed to idols? 11 Thus through your knowledge, the weak person is brought to destruction, the brother for whom Christ died. 12 When you sin in this way against your brothers and wound their consciences, weak as they are, you are sinning against Christ. (1 Corinthians 8:7,10-12)

Paul seems to be saying that the others who are weak should be respected for they are following their consciences, even though they are incorrect. In other words, even though their conscience is incorrect, or at least not well informed, it must be obeyed. 23 It is seems as though Paul has some feel for the nuance between the inner voice of conscience and divine guidance. If he didn’t respect the rational side of conscience, why not simply correct ignorance of the ‘weak’ members of the community?

The other point Paul makes is that it is not enough to be right. One’s conscience also needs to be aware of the impact of one’s actions on others. Causing a scandal, even if you are correct, is still wrong, especially when it harms the faith and morals of others. 24 Does

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22 For brief a discussion of spirit, soul, and body in Paul's thought see Billy and Keating, *Conscience and Prayer : The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology*, p. 28
23 Hogan, *Confronting the Truth : Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, p. 53
injunction show that he considers the conscience to have a guiding role as well? While this passage provides us with intriguing insights into Paul’s understanding of conscience, they remain incomplete because he was not writing about the nature of conscience but simply addressing an issue in his community -- and he passed on to other matters.

After the apostolic age, early Christian writers worked generally within the understanding of conscience they had inherited from the Greeks and from the Old Testament. It was Jerome, who according to the Scholastics in the Middle Ages, introduced a new term and thus another approach for thinking about conscience. Ironically, it seems that this was not his intention so much as it was a scribal error. What Jerome did was to provide a word, *synderesis*, for the idea there is an aspect of conscience which can never be lost. Jerome’s term was *synderesis*, which was contrasted with *syneidesis* (conscience). *Syneidesis* could be lost if one repeatedly ignored it by habitual practices of sin. For the Scholastics, *synderesis* was understood to be the spark of conscience given to us as a gift of God through the Holy Spirit, which differed from conscience which was a function of reason.

Bonaventure identified *synderesis* as a “dispositional tendency” of the will, and he also proposed a two-tiered understanding of conscience (*syneidesis*) which consisted of

- an innate and acquired habit of the practical reason that is incapable of error and which gives us certain knowledge of the primary principle of the natural law
- an entirely acquired habit of the practical reason that is capable of error and seeks to determine the moral good through a process of deliberation.

For Aquinas *synderesis* was:

- “the natural habit of practical reason that contains the primary principles of natural law. (e.g. ‘do good and avoid evil). Once supplied with the necessary data from sense perception, it also provided self-evident knowledge of the basic human goods and of an individual’s need to live the virtuous life.”

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25 For a concise discussion of this ‘error’ see Ibid., p. 10 and Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, p 59.
and conscience was:

- “a judgment of the practical reason that forms the conclusion of a practical syllogism.”

Since the will is naturally oriented toward the good presented to it by reason, he sees no need for it to have a special habit or dispositional power to help it along.”

Besides having different models of the conscience, Bonaventure and Aquinas also differed on the issue of an erroneous conscience. Bonaventure believed that an erroneous conscience had to be changed and not followed. Aquinas believed that one was bound to follow it as long as the error endured:

“Although the judgment of an erring reason is not derived from God, yet the erring reason puts forward its judgment as being true, and consequently as being derived from God, from Whom is all truth.” (ST Pt. I-II, Q 19, Art 5, Rp 1)

In other words, if one’s conscience believes a particular course of action is God’s will, then one must follow his conscience.

Aquinas also considered whether a person is culpable if they follow an erroneous conscience. If the person was ignorant of what was truly good, Aquinas would then argue that it must be determined if his ignorance due to his negligence or even because he willed to be ignorant in order to have an excuse, or, was there was no reasonable way for him to know the truth? Aquinas’ thinking on conscience was a balance of the objective demands of divine law, perceptible through natural law and revelation, filtered through the subjective experience of the person.

After Aquinas there was a reaction against the scholastic idea of universals and the notion that one could speak about the nature of things. William of Ockham (1285-1347) was

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28 Costigane provides this example of the syllogism:

**Major Premise (Synderesis):** All evil must be avoided

**Minor Premise (Reason):** Murder is evil

**Conclusion (Conscience):** Murder must be avoided


29 Billy and Keating, *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology*, p. 6

30 Ibid., p. 7


32 voluntary/vincible ignorance

33 involuntary/invincible ignorance
a leading voice in this nominalist movement. The moral theology of the nominalists demoted the relevance of conscience, emphasizing only the need for obedience to the will of God.34

In the following century Christian Humanists such as Erasmus again emphasized the basic goodness and dignity of man. They promoted such practices as the daily examination of conscience, which brought conscience to the fore once again.35 And after the Council of Trent, the ideas of Thomas Aquinas came back into fashion in the Church and a revised scholasticism came to prominence.

With renewal of Scholasticism, the manualist tradition in moral theology experienced a revival and held sway until Vatican II. In the revised manualist tradition conscience again came to play a major role. The manuals emphasized moral acts in their totality: in the act itself, in the circumstances surrounding the act and in the intentions of the person committing the act.

Not unexpectedly the manualist focus on casuistry – applying reason and general principles to particular cases – led to both abuses and counter-reactions: probabilism, laxist opinions, tutiorism, Janism, rigorism all point to the unsettled nature of thinking in the Church about conscience and moral theology.

The manualists gave the Church a moral theology which had an optimistic view of human nature and an understanding that conscience was the intellectual capacity to perceive what the moral law required.36

In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman wrote “A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk”37 in which he explained his understanding of the nature of conscience. Newman

34 Hogan, Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition, 225, p 86; Billy and Keating, Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology, p 7
35 Ibid., p 9
36 Hogan, Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition, p 97
37 December 1874
rejected both the academic and popular views of conscience of his day. The academics he thought were too interested in scientific method applied to the study of the judgments of conscience, while the popular notions were too focused on conscience as the rights and prerogatives of individuals without any real reference to external divine moral standards.38 Both groups, he thought, ignored the real meaning of conscience: “a dutiful obedience to what claims to be a divine voice, speaking within us.”39 Newman went on in the letter to set forth his understanding of conscience. He restates that conscience is a faculty of the mind and also the voice of God within us. It is interesting to note that he is explicit about the voice of God in our hearts being different from the voice of Revelation; however, this is simply a restatement of Romans 2:14-15:

When Anglicans, Wesleyans, the various Presbyterian sects in Scotland, and other denominations among us, speak of conscience, they mean what we mean, the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation. They speak of a principle planted within us, before we have had any training, although training and experience are necessary for its strength, growth, and due formation. They consider it a constituent element of the mind, as our perception of other ideas may be, as our powers of reasoning, as our sense of order and the beautiful, and our other intellectual endowments.40

Newman also addresses the Catholic believer’s relationship to the Pope as it pertains to one’s conscience and the recent declared doctrine of papal infallibility:

I observe that conscience is not a judgment upon any speculative truth, any abstract doctrine, but bears immediately on conduct, on something to be done or not done. ... Hence conscience cannot come into direct collision with the Church’s or the Pope’s infallibility; which is engaged in general propositions, and in the condemnation of particular and given errors.

Next, I observe that, conscience being a practical dictate, a collision is possible between it and the Pope’s authority only when the Pope legislates, or gives particular orders, and the like.

When it has the right of opposing the supreme, though not infallible Authority of the Pope, it must be something more than that miserable counterfeit which, as I have said above, now goes by the name. If in a particular case it is to be taken as a sacred and

40 Ibid., ii:247-248.
sovereign monitor, its dictate, in order to prevail against the voice of the Pope, must follow upon serious thought, prayer, and all available means of arriving at a right judgment on the matter in question. And further, obedience to the Pope is what is called "in possession;" that is, the onus probandi of establishing a case against him lies, as in all cases of exception, on the side of conscience. Unless a man is able to say to himself, as in the Presence of God, that he must not, and dare not, act upon the Papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin in disobeying it.

... I have already quoted the words which Cardinal Gousset has adduced from the Fourth Lateran; that "He who acts against his conscience loses his soul." This dictum is brought out with singular fullness and force in the moral treatises of theologians. ... Of course, if a man is culpable in being in error, which he might have escaped, had he been more in earnest, for that error he is answerable to God, but still he must act according to that error, while he is in it, because he in full sincerity thinks the error to be truth. 41

Newman maintained all the threads of thought on conscience that went back to Thomas and from there to the early Church as they were spun together from the Greeks and Jewish writers. In his statement that conscience is "a divine voice, speaking within us ... distinct from the voice of Revelation", we think of the Old Testament heart metaphor and Paul’s words in Romans 2:14. When he says that conscience is "a constituent element of the mind", we think of Aquinas and of the Greeks. And when he quotes the Cardinal who wrote "he who acts against his conscience loses his soul", we think not just of Thomas but of the implications of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 8.

Vatican II did not produce any documents which focused primarily on conscience, although two of the documents, Gaudium et Spes and Dignitatis Humanae contain significant paragraphs which do discuss conscience. In neither document is there anything new.

The significant texts in Dignitatis Humanae are found in sections three and fourteen:

On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious. The reason is that the exercise of religion, of its very nature, consists before all

41 Ibid., excerpts from 255-259.
else in those internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind. 42

In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself. 43

The text in section three repeats the Old Testament emphasis on the divine law, the objective aspect of conscience. Yet in the same sentence the subjective aspect is also noted when it says that the perception of the divine law is mediated by conscience.

In section fourteen the faithful are reminded that conscience needs to be formed, and that the Church is place to hear and learn God’s truth. What is interesting is the strong emphasis on teaching. We cannot know precisely what method of teaching was intended, but this is a useful word choice. The relationship of teacher/student is certainly different than others we could imagine (master/slave). One might hope that this implies that conscience ought to be formed in a way that is both patient and tolerant of the struggle to learn and understand.

In Gaudium et Spes the word conscience occurs over two dozen times, but it is only specifically discussed in section sixteen:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity.

43 Ibid., sect. 14
The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.\(^{44}\)

It is hard to find something new or something interesting in this text. We are reminded that everyone has a conscience which is an idea at least as old as the ancient Greeks and present at the beginning of Christianity (Romans 2:14-15). The text also points out that one’s conscience can be wrong, which also has been understood from the beginning and pointed out by many people including, as we have seen, Paul (1 Corinthians) and Thomas Aquinas. Finally, the reference to ‘invincible ignorance’ reminds us that one can be wrong without a loss of dignity.

For two thousand years conscience has been an important issue in the Church. The definition or meaning of “conscience” has undergone refinement, but there have been no upheavals in the basic understanding of conscience. This means that the tension inherent in the Christian understanding of conscience also remains intact: the tension between the subjective and objective aspects of conscience. If the conscience is man’s most secret core, where he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths, then it seems obvious that one must follow judgments of conscience. But if conscience is also an act of reason, with all the limitations and influences that can warp or misguide one’s reasoning, how can we be sure of our conscience? If God has written a law in our hearts, what if reason and thus conscience, reach a judgment at odds with revelation? Shouldn’t that revelation in our hearts and the revelation given through scripture and holy tradition be in harmony? These are questions without definitive answers and the historical arguments surrounding them will continue to go on.

Simply arguing over conscience and Church teaching is not the way forward.

Arguments and demands may change some people’s minds, but it is more likely that people will either get angry and walk away from the Church, or that they will simply build a wall between them and the Church on given moral issue. Reason alone will not solve the problem.

The ancient Jews understood that simple conformity to the law was not enough. Their desire was to interiorize the law so that it lived in their hearts and guided them through life. In controversies over moral issues and the attendant matters of conscience, the Church, particularly the magisterium, should have a similar concern. Although some might find simple conformity to moral norms acceptable, the concern should be to help people become true moral agents by assenting to and appropriating an existing moral norm as their own.45 Concluding its teaching on Moral Conscience in the Catechism the Church says:

> The Word of God is a light for our path. We must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. This is how moral conscience is formed. (CCC 1802)

Which supports the argument that moral doctrine must be taught in the context of prayer and moral discernment46 and echoes the intriguing implication in Dignitatatis Humanae47 that the relationship between the magisterium and the believer on principles of moral order should be that of teacher and student.

In their book *Conscience and Prayer*, Billy and Keating pointed out that Paul’s anthropology of the human person as spirit, soul, and body is an excellent model for the person struggling with a moral issue in prayer. The soul, the focus of reason and the mind is not the whole of the individual. Appeals to conscience through rational argument will therefore be incomplete. It is the individual’s spirit that communes with the spirit of God. The body is the medium through which the judgments of the soul and the movements of the spirit are enacted. Thinking about conscience formation in this fuller context pushes the

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45 Billy and Keating, *Conscience and Prayer : The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology*, p. 73
46 Ibid., p. 100
47 section 14.
focus away from argumentation toward spiritual direction.\footnote{Ibid., p. 28-29}

When prayer plays a prominent role in moral discernment, the individual will pay more attention to \textit{the voice of God echoing in his depths}. In prayer he can say to God: “\textit{probe me ... see if my way is crooked, then lead me in the ancient paths}.”\footnote{Psalm 139:23-24} He can implore him: “\textit{in my inmost being teach me wisdom}.”\footnote{Psalm 51:8b}

Forming one’s conscience in prayer, especially when praying about issues that are divisive, will happen slowly. In fact the formation must begin with the desire for virtue: prudence to judge wisely, courage to seriously consider norms which seem challenging or life changing in their implications, and humility to accept one’s limitations and be open to a change of mind and heart. Such a pursuit requires support that is pastoral, charitable and encouraging. It requires a virtue ethics that understands that an occasional failure in the discernment of moral truth, even for a person who prays, is not a crisis, but a time to recognize and accept the need for God’s mercy.\footnote{Ibid., p.102}

While the Church must approach conflicts of conscience with pastoral concern and patience, the individual needs to also acknowledge some truths about the nature of his conscience. Paul wrote “\textit{I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord}.”\footnote{1 Corinthians 4:4} Paul’s humility, in understanding his limits is the model for anyone forming their conscience.

Conscience is, in part, a function of reason. Reason, in order to make correct judgments, must be fully informed, free from the influences of emotion and of social sin, and must draw upon sound experience. Rarely does anyone find themselves in that set of circumstances. There is always the possibility, especially for an individual reasoning alone,
that reason may fail and the conscience will form in error. Billy and Keating have noted that
the person who never acts against his conscience, may be an example not of someone
grounded in humility, but someone filled with pride. For that person may be listening
simply to his own voice, failing to understand that good habits in prayer do not guarantee
that correct answers will be found readily and quickly.

Another point that Paul made to the Corinthians was not to let pride in their
insightful judgments of conscience cause scandal in the community. Failure to consider the
impact that one’s behavior will have one others is sinful Paul argued, even when the
behavior itself is acceptable. Humility and circumspection in one’s dissent from Church
teaching may at times be the most prudent course. The true end of Christian life of is not to
be right, per se, but to live in Christ with others.

God may not even answer us directly in prayer, spirit to spirit, but may want us to
listen to the words and experience of others, or to find answers in the celebration of the
sacraments. We must respect that God did not make us spirits, but human beings who are
spirit, mind, and body. We must acknowledge that he can use us in our entirety when
answering our prayers.

Our end as Christians is Christ. Our desire is that of Paul: “I live, no longer I, but
Christ lives in me.” This is a call to a life of virtue, a call to a full spirituality that includes
moral discernment and the formation of conscience. It is not reason alone that will make us
moral but, in words of the Catechism, the Word of God in all its forms that is a light for our
path. A path we must follow our whole life long. We must assimilate God’s word in faith and
prayer and put it into practice. This is indeed how moral conscience is formed.

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53 Ibid., p. 78.
54 Ibid., p. 101.
55 Galations 2:20
Works Cited:


