

## *Retrieving the Tradition*

# CONSCIENCE AND TRUTH

• Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger •

“In this sense, Paul can say: the Gentiles are a law to themselves—not in the sense of modern liberal notions of autonomy which preclude transcendence of the subject, but in the much deeper sense that nothing belongs less to me than I myself.”

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*Newman and Socrates: guides to conscience*<sup>1</sup>

. . . At this juncture, I would like to make a temporary digression. Before we attempt to formulate reasonable answers to the questions regarding the essence of conscience, we must first widen the basis of our considerations somewhat, going beyond the personal which has thus far constituted our point of departure. To be sure, my purpose is not to try to develop a scholarly study on the history of theories of conscience, a subject on which different contributions have appeared just recently. I would prefer rather to stay with our approach thus far of example and narrative. A first glance should be directed to Cardinal Newman, whose life and work could be designated a single great commentary on the question of conscience. Nor should Newman be treated in a technical way. The given framework does not permit us to weigh the particulars of Newman's

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<sup>1</sup>This text is a selection from “Conscience and Truth,” presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> Workshop for Bishops, February 1991, in Dallas, Texas. Published in *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007). Reprinted by permission.

concept of conscience. I would simply like to try to indicate the place of conscience in the whole of Newman's life and thought. The insights gained from this will hopefully sharpen our view of present problems and establish the link to history, that is, both to the great witnesses of conscience and to the origin of the Christian doctrine of living according to conscience. When the subject of Newman and conscience is raised, the famous sentence from his letter to the Duke of Norfolk immediately comes to mind: "Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards." In contrast to the statements of Gladstone, Newman sought to make a clear avowal of the papacy. And in contrast to mistaken forms of ultra-Montanism, Newman embraced an interpretation of the papacy which is only then correctly conceived when it is viewed together with the primacy of conscience, a papacy not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it. Modern man, who presupposes the opposition of authority to subjectivity, has difficulty understanding this. For him, conscience stands on the side of subjectivity and is the expression of the freedom of the subject. Authority, on the other hand, appears to him as the constraint on, threat to, and even the negation of, freedom. So then we must go deeper to recover a vision in which this kind of opposition does not obtain.

For Newman, the middle term which establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity is truth. I do not hesitate to say that truth is the central thought of Newman's intellectual grappling. Conscience is central for him because truth stands in the middle. To put it differently, the centrality of the concept of conscience for Newman is linked to the prior centrality of the concept of truth, and can only be understood from this vantage point. The dominance of the idea of conscience in Newman does not signify that he, in the nineteenth century and in contrast to "objectivistic" neo-scholasticism, espoused a philosophy or theology of subjectivity. Certainly, the subject finds in Newman an attention which it had not received in Catholic theology perhaps since Saint Augustine. But it is an attention in the line of Augustine and not in that of the subjectivist philosophy of the modern age. On the occasion of his elevation to cardinal, Newman declared that most of his life was a struggle against the spirit of liberalism in religion. We

might add, also against Christian subjectivism, as he found it in the Evangelical movement of his time and which admittedly had provided him the first step on his lifelong road to conversion. Conscience for Newman does not mean that the subject is the standard vis-à-vis the claims of authority in a truthless world, a world which lives from the compromise between the claims of the subject and the claims of the social order. Much more than that, conscience signifies the perceptible and demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject himself. It is the overcoming of mere subjectivity in the encounter of the interiority of man with the truth from God. The verse Newman composed in 1833 in Sicily is characteristic: "I loved to choose and see my path but now, lead thou me on!" Newman's conversion to Catholicism was not for him a matter of personal taste or of subjective, spiritual need. He expressed himself on this even in 1844, on the threshold, so to speak of his conversion: "No one can have a more unfavorable view than I of the present state of Roman Catholics." Newman was much more taken by the necessity to obey recognized truth than his own preferences, that is to say, even against his own sensitivity and bonds of friendship and ties due to similar backgrounds. It seems to me characteristic of Newman that he emphasized truth's priority over goodness in the order of virtues. Or, to put it in a way which is more understandable for us, he emphasized truth's priority over consensus, over the accommodation of groups. I would say, when we are speaking of a man of conscience, we mean one who looks at things this way. A man of conscience is one who never acquires tolerance, well-being, success, public standing, and approval on the part of prevailing opinion, at the expense of truth. In this regard, Newman is related to Britain's other great witness of conscience, Thomas More, for whom conscience was not at all an expression of subjective stubbornness or obstinate heroism. He numbered himself, in fact, among those fainthearted martyrs who only after faltering and much questioning succeed in mustering up obedience to conscience, mustering up obedience to the truth which must stand higher than any human tribunal or any type of personal taste. Thus two standards become apparent for ascertaining the presence of a real voice or conscience. First, conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste. Second, conscience cannot be reduced to social advantage, to group consensus, or to the demands of political and social power.

Let us take a side-look now at the situation of our day. The individual may not achieve his advancement or well-being at the cost of betraying what he recognizes to be true, nor may humanity. Here we come in contact with the really critical issue of the modern age. The concept of truth has been virtually given up and replaced by the concept of progress. Progress itself "is" truth. But through this seeming exaltation, progress loses its direction and becomes nullified. For if no direction exists, everything can just as well be regress as progress. Einstein's relativity theory properly concerns the physical cosmos. But it seems to me to describe exactly the situation of the intellectual/spiritual world of our time. Relativity theory states that there are no fixed systems of reference in the universe. When we declare a system to be a reference point from which we try to measure a whole, it is we who do the determining. Only in such a way can we attain any results at all. But the determination could always have been done differently. What we said about the physical cosmos is reflected in the second "Copernican revolution" regarding our basic relationship to reality. The truth as such, the absolute, the very reference point of thinking, is no longer visible. For this reason, precisely in the spiritual sense, there is no longer "up or down." There are no directions in a world without fixed measuring points. What we view to be direction is not based on a standard which is true in itself but on our decision and finally on considerations of expediency. In such a relativistic context, so-called teleological or consequentialist ethics ultimately becomes nihilistic, even if it fails to see this. And what is called conscience in such a worldview is, on deeper reflection, but a euphemistic way of saying that there is no such thing as an actual conscience, conscience understood as a "co-knowing" with the truth. Each person determines his own standards. And, needless to say, in general relativity, no one can be of much help to the other, much less prescribe behavior to him.

At this point, the whole radicality of today's dispute over ethics and conscience, its center, becomes plain. It seems to me that the parallel in the history of thought is the quarrel between Socrates-Plato and the sophists in which the fateful decision between two fundamental positions has been rehearsed. There is, on the one hand, the position of confidence in man's capacity for truth. On the other, there is a worldview in which man alone sets standards for himself. The fact that Socrates, the pagan, could become in a certain

respect the prophet of Jesus Christ has its roots in this fundamental question. Socrates' taking up of this question bestowed on the way of philosophizing inspired by him a kind of salvation-historical privilege and made it an appropriate vessel for the Christian Logos. For with the Christian Logos we are dealing with liberation through truth and to truth. If you isolate Socrates' dispute from the accidents of the time and take into account his use of other arguments and terminology, you begin to see how closely this is the same dilemma we face today. Giving up the idea of man's capacity for truth leads first to pure formalism in the use of words and concepts. Again, the loss of content, then and now, leads to a pure formalism of judgment. In many places today, for example, no one bothers any longer to ask what a person thinks. The verdict on someone's thinking is ready at hand as long as you can assign it to its corresponding, formal category: conservative, reactionary, fundamentalist, progressive, revolutionary. Assignment to a formal scheme suffices to render unnecessary coming to terms with the content. The same thing can be seen in more concentrated form, in art. What a work of art says is indifferent. It can glorify God or the devil. The sole standard is that of formal, technical mastery.

We now have arrived at the heart of the matter. Where contents no longer count, where pure praxeology takes over, technique becomes the highest criterion. This means, though, that power becomes the preeminent category whether revolutionary or reactionary. This is precisely the distorted form of being like God of which the account of the Fall speaks. The way of mere technical skill, the way of sheer power, is imitation of an idol and not expression of one's being made in the image and likeness of God. What characterizes man as man is not that he asks about the "can" but about the "should" and that he opens himself to the voice and demands of truth. It seems to me that this was the final meaning of the Socratic search and it is the profoundest element in the witness of all martyrs. They attest to the fact that man's capacity for truth is a limit on all power and a guarantee of man's likeness to God. It is precisely in this way that the martyrs are the great witnesses of conscience, of that capability given to man to perceive the "should" beyond the "can" and thereby render possible real progress, real ascent.

*Systematic consequences: the two levels of conscience**a. Anamnesis*

After all these ramblings through intellectual history, it is finally time to arrive at some conclusions, that is, to formulate a concept of conscience. The medieval tradition was right, I believe, in according two levels to the concept of conscience. These levels, though they can be well distinguished, must be continually referred to each other. It seems to me that many unacceptable theses regarding conscience are the result of neglecting either the difference or the connection between the two. Mainstream scholasticism expressed these two levels in the concepts of *synderesis* and *conscientia*. The word *synderesis* (*synteresis*) came into the medieval tradition of conscience from the stoic doctrine of the microcosm. It remained unclear in its exact meaning and for this reason became a hindrance to a careful development of this essential aspect of the whole question of conscience. I would like, therefore, without entering into philosophical disputes, to replace this problematic word with the much more clearly defined Platonic concept of *anamnesis*. It is not only linguistically clearer and philosophically deeper and purer, but *anamnesis* above all also harmonizes with key motifs of biblical thought and the anthropology derived therefrom. The word *anamnesis* should be taken to mean exactly what Paul expressed in the second chapter of his Letter to the Romans: “When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness” (2:14ff.). The same thought is strikingly amplified in the great monastic rule of St. Basil. Here we read: “The love of God is not founded on a discipline imposed on us from outside, but is constitutively established in us as the capacity and necessity of our rational nature.” Basil speaks in terms of “the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us,” an expression that was to become important in medieval mysticism. In the spirit of Johannine theology, Basil knows that love consists in keeping the commandments. For this reason, the spark of love that has been put into us by the Creator, means this: “We have received interiorly beforehand the capacity and disposition for observing all divine commandments . . . . These are not something imposed from

without.” Referring everything back to its simple core, Augustine adds: “We could never judge that one thing is better than another if a basic understanding of the good had not already been instilled in us.”

This means that the first so-called ontological level of the phenomenon of conscience consists in the fact that something like an original memory of the good and true (the two are identical) has been implanted in us, that there is an inner ontological tendency within man, who is created in the likeness of God, toward the divine. From its origin, man’s being resonates with some things and clashes with others. This *anamnesis* of the origin, which results from the godlike constitution of our being, is not a conceptually articulated knowing, a store of retrievable contents. It is so to speak an inner sense, a capacity to recall, so that the one whom it addresses, if he is not turned in on himself, hears its echo from within. He sees: “That’s it! That is what my nature points to and seeks.”

The possibility for, and right to “mission” rest on this *anamnesis* of the Creator, which is identical to the ground of our existence. The Gospel may, indeed, must be proclaimed to the pagans because they themselves are yearning for it in the hidden recesses of their souls (cf. Is 42:4). Mission is vindicated then when those addressed recognize in the encounter with the word of the Gospel that this indeed is what they have been waiting for. In this sense, Paul can say: the Gentiles are a law to themselves—not in the sense of modern liberal notions of autonomy that preclude transcendence of the subject, but in the much deeper sense that nothing belongs less to me than I myself. My own I is the site of the profoundest surpassing of self and contact with him from whom I came and toward whom I am going. In these sentences, Paul expresses the experience he had as missionary to the Gentiles and that Israel may have experienced before him in dealings with the “god-fearing.” Israel could have experienced among the Gentiles what the ambassadors of Jesus Christ found reconfirmed. Their proclamation answered an expectation. Their proclamation encountered an antecedent basic knowledge of the essential constants of the will of God, which came to be written down in the commandments, which can be found in all cultures, and which can be all the more clearly elucidated the less an overbearing cultural bias distorts this primordial knowledge. The more man lives in the “fear of the

Lord”—consider the story of Cornelius (especially Acts 10:34–35)—the more concretely and clearly effective this *anamnesis* becomes.

Again, let us take a formulation of St. Basil. The love of God that is concrete in the commandments is not imposed on us from without, the Church Father emphasizes, but has been implanted in us beforehand. The sense for the good has been stamped upon us, as Augustine puts it. We can now appreciate Newman’s toast first to conscience and then to the Pope. The Pope cannot impose commandments on faithful Catholics because he wants to or finds it expedient. Such a modern, voluntaristic concept of authority can only distort the true theological meaning of the papacy. The true nature of the Petrine office has become so incomprehensible in the modern age no doubt because we only think of authority in terms that do not allow for bridges between subject and object. Accordingly, everything which does not come from the subject is thought to be externally imposed. But the situation is really quite different according to the anthropology of conscience which through these reflections we have hopefully appreciated. The *anamnesis* instilled in our being needs, one might say, assistance from without so that it can become aware of itself. But this “from without” is not something set in opposition to *anamnesis* but ordered to it. It has a maieutic function, imposes nothing foreign, but rather brings to fruition what is proper to *anamnesis*, namely its interior openness to the truth. When we are dealing with the question of faith and Church whose radius extends from the redeeming Logos over the gift of creation, we must, however, take into account yet another dimension which is especially developed in the Johannine writings. John is familiar with the *anamnesis* of the new “we” that is granted to us in the incorporation into Christ (one Body, i.e., one “I” with him). In remembering they knew him, so the Gospel has it in a number of places. The original encounter with Jesus gave the disciples what all generations thereafter receive in their foundational encounter with the Lord in Baptism and the Eucharist, namely, the new *anamnesis* of faith which unfolds, similarly to the *anamnesis* of creation, in constant dialogue between within and without. In contrast to the presumption of Gnostic teachers who wanted to convince the faithful that their naive faith must be understood and applied much differently, John could say: you do not need such instruction, for as anointed ones (i.e., baptized) you know everything (cf. 1 Jn 2:20). This does not mean a factual omniscience on



the part of the faithful. It does signify, however, the sureness of the Christian memory. This Christian memory, to be sure, is always learning, but proceeding from its sacramental identity, it also distinguishes from within between what is a genuine unfolding of its recollection and what is its destruction or falsification. In the crisis of the Church today, the power of this recollection and the truth of the apostolic word is experienced in an entirely new way where, much more so than hierarchical direction, it is the power of memory of the simple faith which leads to the discernment of spirits. One can only comprehend the primacy of the Pope and its correlation to Christian conscience in this connection. The true sense of this teaching authority of the Pope consists in his being the advocate of the Christian memory. The Pope does not impose from without. Rather, he elucidates the Christian memory and defends it. For this reason the toast to conscience indeed must precede the toast to the Pope because without conscience there would not be a papacy. All power that the papacy has is power of conscience. It is service to the double memory upon which the faith is based and which again and again must be purified, expanded, and defended against the destruction of memory, which is threatened by a subjectivity forgetful of its own foundation as well as by the pressures of social and cultural conformity.

#### b. Conscientia

Having considered this first, essentially ontological level of the concept of conscience, we must now turn to its second level, that of judgment and decision which the medieval tradition designates with the single word *conscientia*, conscience. Presumably this terminological tradition has not insignificantly contributed to the diminution of the concept of conscience. Thomas, for example, only designates this second level as *conscientia*. For him it stands to reason that conscience is not a *habitus*, that is, a lasting ontic quality of man, but *actus*, an event in execution. Thomas of course assumes as a given the ontological foundation of *anamnesis* (*synderesis*). He describes *anamnesis* as an inner repugnance to evil and an attraction to the good. The act of conscience applies this basic knowledge to the particular situation. It is divided according to Thomas into three elements: recognizing (*recognoscere*), bearing witness (*testificari*), and

finally, judging (*judicare*). One might speak of an interaction between a function of control and a function of decision. Thomas sees this sequence according to the Aristotelian model of deductive reasoning. But he is careful to emphasize what is peculiar to this knowledge of moral actions whose conclusions do not come from mere knowing or thinking. Whether something is recognized or not depends too on the will, which can block the way to recognition or lead to it. It is dependent, that is to say, on an already formed moral character which can either continue to deform or be further purified. On this level, the level of judgment (*conscientia* in the narrower sense), it can be said that even the erroneous conscience binds. This statement is completely intelligible from the rational tradition of scholasticism. No one may act against his convictions, as St. Paul had already said (Rom 14:23). But the fact that the conviction a person has come to certainly binds in the moment of acting does not signify a canonization of subjectivity. It is never wrong to follow the convictions one has arrived at—in fact, one must do so. But it can very well be wrong to have come to such askew convictions in the first place, by having stifled the protest of the *anamnesis* of being. The guilt lies then in a different place, much deeper—not in the present act, not in the present judgment of conscience, but in the neglect of my being which made me deaf to the internal promptings of truth. For this reason, criminals of conviction like Hitler and Stalin are guilty. These crass examples should not serve to put us at ease but should rouse us to take seriously the earnestness of the plea: “Free me from my unknown guilt” (Ps 19:13). □

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