

theologian and for describing how the appropriation of faith and insight into moral values actually occurs in the lives of Catholics. That traditional usage is implied in this presentation.

12. Cf. G. Hughes, "Infallibility in Morals"; also cf. his more recent *Authority in Morals*, in which these ideas are developed yet more fully.

13. This is not to deny that the Church, like any human institution, may need to protect its identity and effectiveness through the exercise of external discipline, all the more so in that values are . . . fragile. They, too, need care and protection. Thus there is a place for such a thing as excommunication. But if such a practice is plausible, it should also be rare, invoked only when the very life or mission of the community is at stake.

3. Conscience: Knowledge of Moral Truth

Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw

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Quite a few strange ideas about conscience are in circulation these days. There is conscience as an inner voice which pipes up saying "Don't!" whenever one is tempted. There is conscience on Freudian lines—an irrational residue of infantile tussles with authority figures. There is conscience on a Promethean model, where one's solitary conscience is the only gauge of right and wrong that matters. And, perhaps especially for some Catholics, there is conscience as rebel: "The Church can't tell *me* what to do."

In what follows we shall see why these and various other notions about conscience fall short of the mark. We shall consider four topics: what conscience is; erroneous conscience; formation of conscience; and the role of the Church's teaching in forming right consciences.

A. WHAT CONSCIENCE IS

Lately, a good deal of interesting psychological work has been done on development of conscience. It is clear that development does occur and that it makes sense to speak of its successive stages, even

though it is far from clear how development takes place and exactly what its stages are.

At the outset of the process, small children begin to acquire a sense of good and bad by learning what is acceptable in the eyes of the powerful persons in their lives, usually their parents. If a child makes mother or father angry, the parent's anger causes the child to experience fear and shame. Pleasing parents evokes responses which make the child feel accepted and at ease. Gradually, it seems, these feelings associated with authority figures on whose approval the child depends—fear and shame, confidence and the sense of being at ease—are interiorized in a stylized, more or less distorted, and perhaps even neurotic (or at least neurosis-inducing) form. These feelings, left over from early childhood and interiorized, are what Freud called "superego" (that which is "over" the conscious "self" or in control of it).

We all have superegos, and for many of us these enduring products of infantile emotion cause problems—not least the problem of dictating behavior contrary to what reason and authentic conscience tell us we should do. For example, responding to the promptings of superego, people not infrequently do compulsive things, whose irrational character they recognize even as they do them, simply to ward off the anxiety which they know they will feel if, contrary to superego, they act rationally. Superego is nonreflective and essentially nonrational. Whatever its role in the lives of particular individuals, it is not conscience.

Nor should conscience be confused with the sense of right and wrong which emerges at a somewhat later stage of development. Then children begin to grasp that they belong to various groups with rules and requirements, and that in order to get along they must go along—observe the rules—for otherwise they are not "good" group members as the group sees things. Thus, at this stage children naturally equate right and wrong with meeting or failing to meet the standards of the groups they identify with: the gang, the class, the team, and so on. As with superego, this too is natural and inevitable. But it is not conscience.

The legalistic notion that morality means conforming to rules is typical of this stage. And usually children *do* conform rather easily—

for a while. But then, no less typically, there comes a crisis of resistance and rebellion: "That's what *your* rules say. *I* make my own rules for myself."

This readily evolves into a view of conscience which is in fact very widespread today: conscience is the principle of individual self-assertion against social standards. "Who makes the rules? Those are just rules left over from the past. Nobody takes them seriously today. *I* make my own rules. My conscience is my guide." The rhetoric is libertarian but the attitude is profoundly legalistic, for it assumes that, where morality is concerned, the only alternatives are either to accept and follow rules or to resist and rebel against them. This attitude also tends to confuse the dignity of individual conscience with the absolutizing of individual desires. *I* don't care what anybody else says; *I* want this, and my conscience doesn't bother me in the least when *I* have it." But this is not conscience either.

What is conscience?

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. Confronting reality and one's own possibilities, one perceives what is required for fulfillment. "This is how things are, and this is who *I* am and what *I* am capable of being, so *this* is what it will take for me to be fulfilled in the real world as it is, not in some dream world." One makes a judgment about truth which should shape one's 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 the 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?

This view of conscience emerges gradually but powerfully within the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, since Hebrew has no special word for conscience, its work in discerning right from wrong

often is referred to by a broader term, "heart." The word is not linked, as in English, more or less exclusively to feelings and sentiments, but refers generally to the inner self. It includes the functions of thinking, judging, and willing—all that comes from the self within.

The Old Testament strongly emphasizes that the heart does well in making judgments of right and wrong when, enlightened by God, it is wise. Fools are out of touch with reality; they do themselves harm. It is stupid to turn away from God and serve false gods, for they can do nothing for us. A good heart is a wise heart—it has God's light, it sees reality, and it acts accordingly.

The New Testament similarly speaks of the mind renewed in Christ. But here the word "conscience" also appears. The most important passage is:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them. (Rom 2:14-15)

In other words, pagans can sin, even though they lack the law revealed by God to the Jews, for there is a law of nature, to which conscience testifies, written on every human heart.

The New Testament also makes another very important point about conscience: it can be mistaken. Sometimes it lulls us into a false sense of security. "I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. . . . Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart" (1 Cor 4:4-5). And sometimes conscience is troubled even though God is pleased. "By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us" (1 Jn 3:19-20).

The Second Vatican Council takes up St. Paul's idea of conscience in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et Spes (GS)]*. "In the depths of his conscience, man

detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. . . . 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" (GS 16). We do not invent this law, we discover it. Rejecting a subjectivist notion of conscience, the Council is insisting that there is an objective norm of morality, which it is conscience's task to discern and conform to. "The more that a correct conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by objective norms of morality" (GS 16).

In Vatican II's treatment of conscience there is an allusion to St. Thomas Aquinas. This is understandable, for his treatment is used constantly by the magisterium and in theology. Thomas distinguishes among principles of moral thought, moral reasoning, and judgments of what is right and wrong, reserving his own use of the word "conscience" for the latter. In other words, conscience is one's last, best judgment that a course of action is or is not morally correct. Taking this view of conscience, it is self-evident that one ought to follow conscience. There is nothing else against which to measure conscience, for everything else has already been taken into consideration, and one has reached a conclusion: "This is to be done (or not done)." Discerning what one takes to be the truly good—and, for a Christian, holy—thing, one only need make up one's mind to do it.

B: ERRONEOUS CONSCIENCE

We ought always to follow our consciences, and we are always wrong if we do not. This is so even if conscience is mistaken, erroneous. For if conscience—one's last, best judgment that something is morally right or wrong—is mistaken, one is in no position to know it, and so one can hardly say, "I don't have to follow my conscience, because it is erroneous." (If one *should* make such a judgment, then it is this second judgment—"I was wrong"—and not the first, which actually counts as one's conscience.) In short, if we violate conscience, we think we are doing wrong. To do what one thinks wrong, however, is always morally wrong. Thus, conscience must be followed even if it is erroneous.

St. Thomas makes this point very strongly. He says, for instance, that a pagan who thinks he or she should not be a Christian would sin by converting. We ought to do what we believe is right even if we are wrong, for in doing what we think wrong we are always morally guilty.

From the perspective of blameworthiness, there are two kinds of error of conscience. The first is blameless. One is mistaken, but one does not know it, and there is nothing one could have done, or can do now, to prevent or correct the situation. Not only should a person follow erroneous conscience in these circumstances, but there is absolutely no guilt in doing so. This, presumably, was by and large the condition of those primitive people who engaged in a practice like human sacrifice, thinking it was fitting religious action. As the example suggests, though, the blameless following of erroneous conscience can and often does produce results at odds with the well-being of human persons. Those who engaged in human sacrifice, believing the gods required it, may have incurred no guilt, but those whom they sacrificed ended up no less dead. Erroneous conscience should be followed, but conscience which sees what is truly good is a great deal better.

There are also blameworthy erroneous consciences. Here the ignorance and error are more or less one's own fault. That may be the case with more of us more often than we care to admit. When it comes to moral truth, we all lean toward evasion and self-deception, for if we saw and acknowledged the truth clearly, it might make demands on us. The ignorance in this case is by no means absolute; one has a vague awareness of the truth, but one suppresses it: "I wonder if what I'm doing is wrong? Oh, well, it's probably okay, and anyway I'm too busy to spend time worrying about it." Typically, as people grow morally and spiritually, they become increasingly aware of such areas of dishonesty and insincerity in their lives and take steps to root them out.

When erroneous conscience is like this (the error is real, but more or less our own fault) we still ought to follow conscience and we do wrong if we act against it. But in following such a conscience, we do not escape guilt. In other words, when conscience errs through our own fault, we do wrong if we act contrary to it, and we also do wrong if we follow it. Are we then caught in a trap? Yes, but [one] of

our own making to the extent [that] we have not been honest with ourselves.

Whether and with what difficulty erroneous conscience can be corrected depends on several factors. With the help of good teaching, preaching, counseling, and guidance, many people who are still more or less aware of their error can set it aside and acknowledge moral truth. The case is very different, though, when the error is ingrained and of long standing. Vatican II speaks of conscience which "by degrees grows practically sightless" as a result of a practice of sinning (GS 16). In this state of hardness of heart, error virtually defies correcting because the individual is not open to recognizing his or her mistake. Arising from persistence in sin, the condition is a guilty one, yet the person no longer feels guilt or hears the call to repent.

It is no help to tell such people, "You'll be all right if you just do what your conscience tells you." They *are* doing what their now sightless consciences tell them, and they are quite distinctly *not* all right. Perhaps the best time to approach them as they really need to be approached—with the aim of helping them once more recognize and act on moral truth—is when they suffer painful consequences as a result of their evil-doing. Then the message can be, "You're really hurting yourself by what you are doing, and that's stupid."

C: FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

Formation of conscience is only possible for those who wish to live good lives, for a conscience must be docile, teachable, if it is to be formed.

Formation is not a matter of imposing rules and regulations on somebody else. That is simply legalism again. Rather, formation supposes that those who receive it are trying to lead decent lives, and are therefore open to seeing moral truth if it is presented to them clearly and convincingly. Still, human beings are capable of enormous inconsistency; they want to know and do what is right—but not necessarily in all areas and all at once. One is reminded of Augustine's prayer before his conversion, "Lord, make me chaste—but not now." The desire to do the right thing makes formation possible; hesitation about doing what is right makes it necessary.

How to go about it? Formation of conscience involves three elements.

The first is the clarification of moral principles comprising that law "written on [our] hearts" of which St. Paul speaks. These can be expressed and presented so that people see their truth. Often, the best approach is dialectical: asking questions and inviting discussion, so that individuals come to state moral truths for themselves. At bottom, people are not ignorant of the law written on their hearts. They simply need help in drawing it out and articulating it. For Catholics, the Church's teaching is an important source of such help.

The second element is to foster awareness of practical possibilities. "Isn't everybody aware of them?" someone might object. To which the truthful answer is, "Yes, everyone is aware of some practical possibilities, but often those—and only those—which contemporary culture emphasizes." In every age and place, conventional wisdom commends unsavory practices—for example, bribery, slavery, abortion—as *the* practical possibilities. People immersed in a particular culture, as we all are, can find it next to impossible to imagine realistic alternatives.

Conscience formation seeks to call attention to alternatives which are practical possibilities for the living of a truly good and humanly fulfilling life. Jesus does this not only by his teaching and preaching but by his example. Indeed, in the fallen human condition, the only truly good way for human beings is the redemptive way of Christ. But it is not easy for people to whom Jesus' way has not been presented as an interesting and attractive option to grasp that. Presenting it as such is part of the task of formation.

Third, conscience formation seeks to show the relevance of moral principles to action. Many decent people are steeped in legalism. They believe that morality is a set of rules, and that, wherever there is no rule, they are free to do as they please. They believe that living a morally good life consists in little more than not committing mortal sins. It is formation's task to show that *every* choice is morally important, and that a good life is one lived *wholly* in the light of moral truth. This often requires challenging the goals and standards which people take for granted. "I'm faithful to my wife, I don't steal from my employer, and I go to church on Sunday—so my

moral life is in excellent shape. Of course, I do what it takes to get ahead professionally, including bamboozling clients and running roughshod over colleagues—but that's business, not morality." Conscience formation tries to remove the moral blinders of people who think this way, not least by encouraging them to question their self-righteousness.

The ideal outcome of conscience formation likewise has several elements.

One is that people outgrow immaturity of conscience and put aside legalistic thinking. Anxious feelings, embarrassment, and the approval or disapproval of others no longer rule their lives. They cease supposing that their feelings are a reliable guide to their moral state ("If it doesn't bother me to do that, it must be okay"). More and more they want to do what is truly right, they actually do it, and in doing it they integrate their selves around their choices. The entire personality is increasingly at the service of moral truth and right living.

Practical acceptance of moral truth itself becomes easier. Temptation does not vanish, but it becomes less powerful. People experience growing spontaneity in knowing and doing what is right. The classical name for this is "prudence." Prudent persons are able to think through moral problems for themselves—not necessarily in a highly sophisticated way, but in a way which lets them get to the heart of the matter when they try to explain why something is wrong: "I'm not going to take more than my share because it wouldn't be fair to the others," "I'm not going to pad my expenses because that's stealing from the company."

It is a sign that one has not reached this ideal state of conscience formation if, knowing the relevant facts in a situation, one remains in doubt about whether one may or may not do something. What then? Today it is fairly common for people, particularly persons of a religious bent, to turn to what they call discernment: "I'm going to 'discern' whether this choice would be right, and then follow my conscience." Discernment has an honorable place in the spiritual life, but this is not it. In such cases, "discernment" is simply another name for falling back on one's feelings and doing as they dictate. This way of proceeding easily leads to persistent rationalization in support of a practice of sinning. The appropriate response is further thought and

study, along with consulting reliable—that is, authentically prudent—advisers.

D: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH'S TEACHING IN FORMING RIGHT CONSCIENCES

For several reasons, many people think of the Church's moral teaching as the imposition of a set of rules. One reason is rooted in legalism. Often enough, the Church's teaching *has* been presented as a set of rules, and even when it has not, people schooled in legalism suppose that any moral teaching must be an exercise in rule-making. Another reason is rooted in lack of insight into moral truth, a lack which can be on the part of the teacher or those being instructed or both.

Ambivalence also plays a part in this situation. Most of us do not want to be altogether consistent. We want the advantages that come with being Christians, but sometimes we do not want to pay the price. The resurrection is good news, but we would rather not hear about the cross. When someone else points out our responsibilities to us, we are likely to say something like, "You're just trying to impose your rules on me. When it comes to *that*, I'll follow my own conscience." Having said which, we are then also likely to say, "I'm in good faith, I lead a good life, and I deserve the benefits that come from that." Ambivalence. In less abstract terms, we want Jesus to be our friend, but we are not too eager to be his, especially when that involves following his way of the cross.

Moreover, many Christians, including Catholics, seem less than wholehearted in their commitment to the faith they profess. Raised in the faith perhaps, and accustomed to membership in a parish or congregation, they accept the social requirements of "belonging" but not a great deal more. If nobody noticed whether they went to church or not, they might quit going altogether.

It would be asking too much to insist that people not have mixed motives for their membership in the Church. That is how we are. Yet because the motives are mixed, there is an evident need to clarify the requirements of faith and deepen faith itself, both in ourselves and in others. The quality of our religious commitment stands

always in need of upgrading. If it is upgraded sufficiently, the things one *must* do as a Christian do not seem like impositions from the outside, but are understood as necessary to living out the commitment consistently and joyfully, even when this means taking up the cross and following Jesus' way.

Persons of wholehearted and mature faith see the Church's teaching not as an imposition but as a precious source of light. They reason along these lines: "God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ; he founded a Church, and the Spirit is constantly present in that Church today, helping it always to teach what Jesus taught; therefore, I find in the Church's teaching what I need to know about living in a way that is true and holy."

Even so, the Church's moral teaching is not mysterious and impenetrable, something to be taken on faith but not understood. The principles which underlie all of the Church's moral teachings are written in the human heart; as Vatican II expresses it [in the Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae (DH)*], they "have their origin in human nature itself" (*DH 14*). So, we can see the truth of the moral norms which the Church teaches. When we do not immediately do so, we can take it that the problem is with us, not with the teaching.

The Church's teaching tells us realistically what our situation is; it conveys a great deal of information about the human condition and human possibilities, especially about the fall, redemption, and our vocation to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, though, actual teaching has not always done this, or done it particularly well. The emphasis has been on normative principles: for example, "You shouldn't commit adultery." Not enough has been said about why people are tempted to commit adultery, and how they harm themselves if they do. This, too, is an expression of legalism.

Since the Church is not a lawmaker in morality, it has no choice—as legalism would suggest—about what to teach. It must teach neither more nor less than what is true. Much of the speculation before Pope Paul VI published the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 centered on whether he would "change" the Church's teaching on contraception. Supposing that teaching to be true, however, Pope Paul could no more have "changed" it than some earlier pope could have legislated it into existence. The only real alternatives to teaching

moral truth are to teach moral falsehood or not to teach at all. Similarly, pastors do people no favor by "going easy on them"—ignoring or downplaying moral truths, as if they were rules which a pastor has the option of enforcing or not enforcing. The truly "pastoral" thing to do is to help people see the truth and live by it.

This is a very important point, not least because a great deal of popular thinking about pastoral practice today seems to operate on the contrary assumption. To grasp the implications of this, imagine two doctors, one a friendly, sympathetic sort, "good with patients," who hates to upset people, the other a conscientious practitioner whose main concern is treating and curing people if she can. The first physician examines a patient and finds that he has a stomach cancer which requires radical surgery; but the patient is afraid of the surgery, and so the doctor gives him medication for his pains and sends him home. The second doctor also sees a patient with the same kind of cancer; she tells the patient, "I'm sorry, but you've got stomach cancer, and you need to have half your stomach taken out. But I think we've got a good chance of stopping this thing if we get right to it." Which is the better doctor?

Is it so different when the question is: What does it mean to be pastoral? Certainly a good pastor shows sympathy toward those who are in sin and are suffering from its consequences. But he does not stop with sympathy. He tells people the truth, gently but clearly and firmly, and tries to help them escape from their condition of sin. Perhaps he will not succeed. It is certain, though, that a pastor whose "compassion" causes him to shrink from speaking moral truth will not help anyone escape from sin; at best, he will help people avoid feelings of guilt.

4. The Moral Conscience

Richard M. Gula

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Achieving clarity about the moral conscience has been complicated by the way the theological tradition has spoken of it.¹ What we understand today by conscience is rooted in the biblical notion of the "heart." The heart is the seat of vital decisions, for it is the center of feeling and reason, decision and action, intention and consciousness.² The hope of the messianic prophecies is for the people to receive a new heart so that their inmost inclinations will be to live out of the gift of divine love which they receive in the covenant (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:14-21).

In the New Testament, Jesus reflects the Hebrew understanding of the unity of the person to be centered in the heart. From a person's heart come the evil ideas which lead one to do immoral things (Mark 7:21), whereas a good person produces good from the goodness in the heart (Luke 6:45). Paul is the chief New Testament author to deal with conscience. He weaves together Hebrew and Greek thought to speak of conscience as our fundamental awareness of the difference between good and evil, as a guide to loving decisions, and as a judge for acting in ways unbecoming of a Christian (Rom 2:15; 1 Tim 1). From the biblical vision of the heart as that dimension of us which is most sensitive and open to others, especially to God's love, we can develop our theological understanding of conscience.

The medieval debates spoke of conscience as a function of the intellect (practical reasoning) or of the will (choosing). The manualist