

---

## CONSCIENCE AND THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

---

Mgr Alvaro del Portillo

---

*This is the text of an address given by the Prelate of Opus Dei and Chancellor of the Roman Athenaeum of the Holy Cross to the Second Conference of Moral Theology organised by the above mentioned Athenaeum and the John Paul II Family Institute, in November 1988. The sub-headings have been added to the text.*

1. Today's session of our Conference is devoted to a very important subject in the life of the Church: the relationship between the teaching of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and conscience. Since the competence of the Magisterium in moral matters was studied in the previous session, I would like to offer now some reflections on the dignity and the role of conscience; and particularly on the proper character of the Christian conscience vis-à-vis those who, by virtue of the mission received from Christ, promote his salvific message among men.

Conscience is a theme of abiding interest for moral reflection. In fact, conscience 'is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary, where he finds himself alone with God.'<sup>1</sup> Both the Fathers of the Church and subsequent theological reflection have devoted great attention to conscience, profiting from the many references in Holy Scripture. As is well known, only St Paul makes frequent use of the word 'conscience' (*sineidesis*); but both Old and New Testaments do make use of analogous terms like 'heart,' 'sagacity,' 'prudence,' etc., to illustrate important facts concerning conscience.

### Rightful place of conscience

In our days new interest has been added to this question. We all know that for the past several years a widespread movement of moral subjectivism has proclaimed itself to be the natural development of Catholic teaching about conscience.<sup>2</sup> This current of thought and opinion has installed the individual's subjectivity as an autonomous and supreme tribunal, before which the teachings of the Church — particularly those regarding ethics — are summoned and judged, without right to appeal. In this way conscience has been promoted to the rank of a theological source (*locus theologicus*), an originating and almost exclusive authority. Such a tribunal overlooks the fact that the Church was founded by Christ and is constantly assisted by the Holy Spirit for the

purpose of illuminating the consciences of the faithful and of all men of good will, by making known to them truths that all must seek and venerate.<sup>3</sup> These are the circumstances that render a theological reflection on conscience particularly necessary and urgent today.

### Conscience as judgment

2. Theology traditionally distinguishes between actual conscience and habitual conscience. The former is the judgment regarding the good or evil nature of a particular act; the latter is the permanent knowledge we have of ethical norms and the first moral principles. The particular act is judged in the light of this knowledge. As St Thomas explains, the habit is the principle or source of the act; that is why the term conscience also defines the natural habit, namely *synderesis*.<sup>4</sup> Both Holy Scripture and the Fathers often refer to conscience in an all-inclusive way, referring both to the judgment of conscience as well as the habits which play a role in such a judgment.

Considering conscience in this comprehensive way, Pope John Paul II speaks of 'a twofold reading of the moral law: the one written upon the tablets of the Decalogue and the Gospel, and the other engraved in the moral conscience of man.'<sup>5</sup> In the teaching of St Paul, those who are ignorant of the moral law revealed by God 'are a law unto themselves,' insofar as 'they show the work of the law written in their hearts. Their conscience bears witness to them, even when conflicting thoughts accuse or defend them' (Rom 2:14-15).

Natural moral truth, which is summed up in love of God and love of neighbour, has been renewed and reinforced in human conscience, as well as being enriched with the new content of the law of charity (*lex caritatis*), poured out in our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (cf Rom 5:5; Eph 1:13-14 and 3:17-18). That is why St Paul can say that his conscience 'bears witness in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 9:1). The result of grace announced by Jeremiah is fully accomplished in the Christian conscience:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts;  
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer 31:33).

### The dignity of conscience

Moral norms, therefore, are not an arbitrary expression of the will of

### *Position Paper 202*

God, something dialectically opposed to man's freedom. Moral norms, above all else, are moral and salvific truths. A truth that is *interior* to man, not just interiorized. It is interior, first of all, in an *ontological* sense, because moral norms reveal the truth about the good of the human person and his/her salvation. It is interior also in an *epistemological* sense, because it is written in the heart of man, in the conscience of the human race.<sup>6</sup>

However the dignity of conscience formally springs from the fact that the truth man finds in his heart is 'a law which he has not laid upon himself . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged.'<sup>7</sup> A concept similar to the one just described with the words of the Second Vatican Council is used by St Paul when he explains the way in which conscience binds. It is only after explaining to the Romans that political authority responds to a divine design, and that whoever offers resistance to it is opposing the order established by God, that the Apostle declares that 'it is necessary to be subject [to authority], not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience's sake' (Rom 13:5).

#### **Conscience as the echo of God's voice**

The dignity of conscience is therefore very great, because through it the voice of God can resound within man. 'It is in this, and in nothing else, where the mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience lie: it is the place and the sanctuary where God speaks to man.'<sup>8</sup> The absoluteness and inviolability of conscience arise from the fact that through conscience man sees and recognises the demands of the divine law, 'which he is bound to follow faithfully in all his activity, so that he may come to God, his last end.'<sup>9</sup>

#### **Conscience can be true or false**

3. All I have said about conscience so far, though accurate, is still incomplete. Revelation does not authorise us to always and absolutely identify the voice of the conscience with the voice of God. Undoubtedly, man's conscience and heart are the voice of moral duty, but they also belong to a person, to each individual — they are an immediate and profound expression of his/her own will and moral personality.

As man himself can err, so too can conscience. For this reason conscience is defined in Holy Scripture as 'good', 'evil', 'feeble',

'pure', 'impure', etc. St Paul gives thanks to God, whom he serves with a *pure conscience* as his forefathers did (cf 2 Tim 1:3); he exhorts the deacons to hold the mystery of faith in a *pure conscience* (cf 1 Tim 3:9); and he encourages his beloved Timothy to fight the good fight with faith and a *good conscience* (cf 1 Tim 1:19). On the other hand, of those who are contaminated and of the infidels, St Paul claims that both their mind and their conscience are *defiled* (cf Tit 1:15). He admonishes the Hebrews to draw near the fullness of faith having their hearts *cleansed from an evil conscience* (cf Heb 10:22).

In the eighth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle studies the problem of meat sacrificed to the idols and gives instructions on how to relate to those who have a *weak conscience* (cf 1 Cor 8:7, 10 and 12). An oft recurring expression in both Old and New Testaments is that of *hardness and infidelity of heart* (cf Is 6:9-10; Ezech 2:4 and 6:9; Eph 4:17-18; Mt 13:15). Jesus explains to his disciples that it is from within, that is, out of the heart of man, that come evil thoughts, fornication, thefts, murders, etc. (cf Mk 7:21-23). The Lord also talks about adultery being committed in the heart (cf Mt 5:28).<sup>10</sup>

### Conscience is not independent of God

As we have seen then, man's conscience and heart are not always good. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the heart of man offers outright resistance to the Holy Spirit (cf Acts 7:51); and the prophet Hosea affirms that he who is *evil of heart* will be scandalized by the Lord's ways (cf Hos 14:10).<sup>11</sup> St Augustine asks himself what it means to be *evil of heart*. And he answers:

It means not having an upright heart, but a devious one. He who has an evil heart thinks that God always lies; he regards as evil all that God has made; he is displeased with all of God's judgments, particularly those condemning his own behaviour; he sets about denouncing the *evil intentions of God* when they happen to be at odds with his own desires. He who lacks an upright heart not only fails to conform to the will of God, but also expects God to lower himself to his level.<sup>12</sup> [italics added]

In sum: moral conscience can err. It can err without fault of its own, misled by a difficult situation or a particular problem. It can err culpably or with slight negligence. Man can make a wrong use of his conscience;

### *Position Paper 202*

he can be unfaithful to the deepest truth of his heart; he may want *not* to listen to the voice of God. He may want to make his conscience a tribunal before which 'God's intentions', which are contrary to his own desires, are judged and condemned. In this way, man can break 'the most profound bond uniting him with his Creator'<sup>13</sup> and can turn his own conscience into 'a destructive force of his own humanity, instead of the holy place where God tells him what is good for him.'<sup>14</sup>

#### **Forming our conscience properly**

4. The human experience of an evil conscience and a hardened heart, along with our regard for the dignity of the conscience, imposes on us a fundamental moral task: that of forming our own conscience. In the words of the letter to the Ephesians, the purpose of formation of conscience is to bring us to a state of

perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ. And this he has done so that we may be now no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine. . . . Rather are we to practise the truth in love, and so grow up in all things in him who is the head, Christ (Eph 4:13-15).<sup>15</sup>

The problem of conscience is, fundamentally, a problem of truth: 'to practise the truth in love' (Eph 4:5) (*veritatem facientes in caritate*). In many instances I have personally witnessed the Venerable Josemaría Escrivá engage in deep meditation on these words of St Paul. He wanted to teach those around him to be understanding, to excuse, to forgive: '*veritatem facientes in caritate*, defending the truth without hurting anyone';<sup>16</sup> and at the same time he wanted them to love the truth, 'even though the truth may mean your death.'<sup>17</sup> This love for truth is the starting point for the formation of conscience. Today, this love must conquer and cure a widespread and dangerous illness, namely, indifference to truth. This attitude stems from the idea that possessing truth is not a primary value for man.<sup>18</sup> Frequently it arises from the prejudice that truth causes division among men and is, therefore, harmful for peace and harmony in society.

#### **Indifference to moral truth**

John Paul II has pointed out that the ultimate origin of indifference

*Alvaro del Portillo*

towards the truth lies in pride, 'wherein according to the entire ethical tradition of the Church, the root of every human evil is found.'<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the formation of conscience requires, as a first step, the conversion of the heart, that is, 'we must keep our soul young, call upon our Lord, listen to him and, having found out what has gone wrong, ask his pardon.'<sup>20</sup> All of these attitudes to God can be addressed by the Sacrament of Penance.

Nevertheless there exist particularly difficult situations, when in spite of our sincere efforts, we will have to turn to the Lord with a prayer like that given us by the Psalmist:

Teach me, o Lord, the way of thy statutes, and I will keep it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart (Ps 119:33-34).

#### **Listening to the voice of conscience**

I think I can say that Christ has already given an answer to our prayer in the words recorded by St Matthew:

Go, therefore, and instruct all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world' (Mt 28:19-20).<sup>21</sup>

Christ knows the difficulties which our weakened human nature is bound to meet in its attempt to be faithful to itself and to its Creator, and for this reason he has instituted alternative sources by which we can inform our conscience: of these, the most fundamental one is Revelation, as it is guarded and faithfully interpreted by the Church.

The Apostle Paul explains that the various ministries and charisms entrusted by Christ to the Church are destined to the building up of conscience. Christ appointed some men as apostles, some as prophets, others again as evangelists, and others as pastors and teachers, 'in order to perfect the saints for a work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God (Eph 4:11-13). We can say, in the words of John Paul II, that 'it is *in the Church* that a person's conscience grows and matures . . . Consequently, fidelity to the Church prevents the moral conscience from falling into error regarding the good of man.'<sup>22</sup>

### **Finding the right scale of values**

The guidance given by the Magisterium of the Church is particularly necessary to throw light upon the conscience in its ethical evaluation of some specific questions. This is so because there are matters which, in spite of being closely related to the good and the dignity of the human person, are obscured by a variety of factors (psychological, cultural, social, financial, etc.). At the present day this is so in the realm of sexual ethics and, particularly, the questions dealt with by the Encyclical *Humanae vitae*. St Augustine observes:

Some things would be believed to be very trivial, unless Scripture had declared them more serious than they appear to us.<sup>23</sup>

And he adds elsewhere:

Let us not use a false scale to weigh the things we like, saying capriciously 'this is grave but that is not'; instead let us use the scale of Scripture, and weigh on it the gravity of a sin, or rather, recognise on this scale the weight that God has assigned each fault.<sup>24</sup>

### **Docility to the Church**

It is necessary to turn to Revelation, as it is interpreted by the Church, in the same way as we turn from the uncertain to the certain, from the errant and the tempting to the honest and the saintly.<sup>25</sup> If we believe that the Church is Christ's Church, our conscience cannot adopt any other attitude than to treat her as such.

I am sure that your work will contribute to show that the Magisterium of the Church, with its charism of truthfulness, represents a divine gift for the Christian conscience as well as for the non-Christian conscience. In the Church, it is a fundamental and elevated mission of theology to collect and illumine the arguments which explain to men the reasonableness and the profound humaneness of the moral teaching of the Church. By doing so, theology renders a precious service to the faithful and to all those sincerely seeking the truth, and offers an effective contribution to the peace and well-being of conscience.

## References

1. Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Church in the modern world*, no. 16;
2. Cf. Ratzinger, *Lefonti della Teologia Morale*, CRIS Documents, no. 54, (Rome 1985) p.12;
3. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, no. 1;
4. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 13, c. With regard to the various accepted readings in the Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the meaning signified by the word, 'conscience', see Delhaye, Ph., *La conscience morale du Chrétien*, coll. *Le Mystère chrétien*, Desclée, (Paris 1964), pp. 17-80;
5. John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the International Youth Year*, March 31, 1985, no. 6;
6. Cf. John Paul II, *idem*;
7. Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Church in the modern world* no. 16;
8. John Paul II, *Address*, August 17, 1983, no. 2, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983), p. 256;
9. Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, no. 3;
10. With regard to the 'adultery committed in the heart', see: John Paul II, *Uomo e donna lo creò. Catechesi sull'amore* Città Nuova Editrice — Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 1987, second edition, pp. 179-182;
11. This quote is according to the version used by St Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 146;
12. St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, ad Ps. 146.7*. Taken from the Italian translation entitled *Commento ai Salmi di Lode*, Paoline, (Milan 1986), pp. 252-253;
13. John Paul II, *Address*, August 17, 1983, no. 2, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983), p. 256;
14. *Ibid.*, no. 3, p. 257;
15. Cf. John Paul II, *Address*, August 24, 1983, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2(1983), pp. 292-294
16. Escrivá de Balaguer, J., *The Forge, Scepter*, (New York 1988), no. 559;
17. Escrivá de Balaguer, J., *The Way*, Four Courts Press, (Dublin 1985), no. 34;
18. John Paul II, *Address*, August 24, 1983, nos. 1-2, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2(1983), pp. 292-293;
19. *Ibid*, no. 2, p. 293;
20. Escrivá de Balaguer, J., *Christ is Passing by*, Four Courts Press, (Dublin, 1982), no. 57;
21. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom* nos. 1 and 4; Paul VI, Enc. *Humanae vitae*, no. 22. John Paul II, *Address*, August 24, 1983, no. 3, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI 2 (1983), p. 294;
22. John Paul II, *Address*, August 24, 1983, no. 3 in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI 2 (1983), p. 294;
23. St Augustine, *Enchiridion de Fide*, c. 79; ML 40,270. With regard to the question of whether or not the moral norm declared by the encyclical *Humanae*



*Position Paper 202*

*vitae* belongs to the whole of the revealed doctrine contained in the biblical sources, see John Paul II, *Uomo e donna lo credò*, op. cit., p. 457

24. St Augustine, *De Baptismo contra Donatistas*, Lib. II, c. VI, 9; ML 43 132;

25. Cf Manzoni, A. *Osservazioni sulla Morale Cattolica*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 1986, p. 99.