



Conscience Perspectives: The Roman Catholic View

31.08.2006 | Brennan, Frank, S.J.

Part of a trilogy on 'conscience' from diverse perspectives published in Geshar, the journal of the Council of Christians and Jews, Victoria, Australia. See also Rabbi Fred Morgan and Jack Opie

Conscience Perspectives: The Roman Catholic View

Fr Frank Brennan SJ

The human person is a moral agent who is shaped by his actions. By forming and informing her conscience, the human person is deciding not only what she wants to do but also who she wants to be. It is not only the mind or the will that acts morally but the whole person. As the person changes and grows, the conscience is formed and grows too. So each conscience is unique as each person is unique. For the Catholic, the conscience is sacred ground where the person meets God; all others (including church authorities), unless invited in, are trespassers in this place. Pope Pius XII described conscience as "a sanctuary on the threshold of which all must halt, even, in the case of a child, his father and mother". John Henry Newman had earlier defined conscience "not as a fancy or an opinion, but as a dutiful obedience to what claims to be a divine voice, speaking within us". The Catholic view of conscience holds in tension the dignity and freedom of the human person, the teaching authority of the Church, and the search for truth and the good. The tension arises because the Catholic concedes not only the possibility but also the common reality of the incompletely formed conscience which may receive guidance from the Church's teaching authority. This tension accounts for the Catholic Church's unequivocal affirmation of the primacy of individual conscience against the State, together with its occasional ambivalence about the role of conscience in relation to Church authority.

The conscientious Catholic would deviate from church teaching on moral issues only with deep regret and after careful attention to the developing and changing situation, and only on condition that he is satisfied that he has a greater command of the facts or of his situation than the Church authority issuing universal declarations faithful to a constant tradition. The Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on Religious Freedom said, "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." However, in changing times or particular personal circumstances, there may be true doubt about the certain doctrine of the Church and its application to the changing circumstances. Changes to church teaching about slavery and usury were preceded by persons of good conscience acting at variance with traditional teaching.

Conscience is engaged when the person looking ahead asks, "What should I do or not do?", or when the person looking back asks, "Should I have done that or not done that?" There are two extremes to be avoided in answering these questions. The person may be tempted simply to do his own thing, choosing according to his own preference on the basis that there is no objective truth or verifiable good. Or the agent may woodenly apply the prescriptions of authority without attending to the voice of conscience urging him to do the greater good or to be prophetic, not just complying with the mores of his society or church community. Ideally, the actor will follow his conscience.

In the New Testament, Paul takes up the idea from the prophetic literature of the Old Testament that God's moral law is inscribed in the human heart. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law unto 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 and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them. (Rom 2:14-15)

One does not have to be a natural law theorist to affirm a law implanted in the human heart commanding the person, in freedom, to seek the truth, to do good and to avoid evil. In the very act of seeking the truth and trying to do good, the person further forms and informs her conscience. But what is truth? What is the good in this particular situation? In the Catholic tradition, the person is guided and even directed in the formation and informing of conscience by the Church authorities. Traditionally, the church authorities claim to teach not only that which is revealed in the scriptures but also that which can be derived from the natural law by reflecting on the ends for which man is created. Many Catholics now share the contemporary era's pessimism about an all-embracing natural law based on a single static human nature that permits a wholesale determination of what is right and wrong in each and every situation.

Ultimately every person is obliged to follow their conscience even if that conscience be erroneous. When making a decision to act or to refrain from an action, in good conscience, the Catholic actor is obliged to consider the church teaching on the matter at hand. Before becoming pope, Pope Benedict XVI provided us with a good rule of thumb on conscience: "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 the truth."

The History

Saint Augustine taught that "there is no soul, however perverted, . . . in whose conscience God does not speak." Thomas Aquinas taught that a person must always follow their conscience even if that conscience be erroneous. For "when a reason which is in error proposes something as a command of God, then to dismiss the dictate or reason is just the same as dismissing the command of God."

The possible conflict between conscience and church authority was highlighted in the dispute between Prime Minister W Gladstone and John Henry Newman after the First Vatican Council in 1870 taught and defined that the Pope could define infallibly "a doctrine of faith or morals". Gladstone feared that "no one can now become (a Catholic) without renouncing his moral and mental freedom, and placing his civil loyalty and duty at the mercy of another". Newman refuted this fear conceding that there may be "extreme cases in which conscience may come into collision with the word of a Pope, and is to be followed in spite of that word". He asserted that "infallibility alone would block the exercise of conscience" but that "the Pope is not infallible in that subject matter in which conscience is of supreme authority" and thus "no dead-lock, such as is implied in the objection ...can take place between conscience and the pope". Thus his notorious declaration:

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.

The Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on Religious Freedom in 1965 teaches:

In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God, for whom he was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a 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 Church teaching on conscience gives no consolation to the uninitiated, thinking they can simply do their own thing. But neither does it accord religious authorities the liberty of insisting upon wooden compliance with their instruction or view of the world. Good conscience must always be accorded primacy even by bishops who would act differently in the circumstances, bearing in mind John Henry Newman's observation 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", and Aquinas's view that conscience is what I genuinely personally believe, even if mistakenly, that God is asking of me. As the Vatican Council said in its 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (with some modification out of consideration for those offended by non-inclusive language):

In the depths of our conscience, we detect a law which we do not impose upon ourselves, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to our hearts more specifically: do this, shun that. For we have in our hearts a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of the human person; according to it we will be judged.

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There we are alone with God, whose voice echoes in our depths.

We must always accord primacy to the conscientiously formed and informed conscience, regardless of the person's place in the church hierarchy. The Christians' contribution to the contemporary world would be greater if there were more attention to the formation of conscience and to the injunction: educate your conscience and to that conscience be true. For most people, the questions of conscience will not be: am I to believe this church teaching? But "Am I to do this particular act or refrain from it?" That act may be one relating to personal relationships; it may be about political engagement and a commitment to make a difference in the public forum. It may even be the decision to endorse a war or to condemn it or to remain silent.

Each of us must ensure that we have a formed and informed conscience as we decide not only what we will believe, as that is probably the less problematic part, but also as we decide what we will do. Before acting we will search for the truth insofar as the truth is discoverable. But we will then make prudential decisions about what to do, having applied whatever moral principles might apply to the matter under consideration. In his World Day of Peace Address in January 2002 Pope John Paul II said:

Respect for a person's conscience, where the image of God himself is reflected (cf. Gen 1:26-27), means that we can only propose the truth to others, who are then responsible for accepting it. To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offense against human dignity, and ultimately an offense against God whose image that person bears.

There are many complex issues in the world today which are not susceptible of unequivocal answers about what is true and what is good or what is the greater good in terms of actions and outcomes. In these situations, I cannot acquit my conscience simply by pleading that I followed what the bishops said, did or failed to do. All of us, like the bishops, are obligated to play our respective roles in the societies of which we are a part, forming and informing our consciences, and acting according to our consciences. The Second Vatican Council's 1965

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World made clear that often it is the laity and not the church leaders who are the experts about moral quandaries in the world. The laity were not to expect that the bishops would have all the answers. The Council stated:

Laypeople should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. Let the laypeople not imagine that their pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give them a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the laypeople take on their own distinctive role.

Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church's authority for their opinion. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good.

After the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics made decisions in conscience not to follow Pope Paul VI's teaching on birth control Ð a teaching which varied from the teaching of other Christian churches whose hierarchy being free to marry often had personal experience of married life, and a teaching which was at variance from the recommendations made by the majority of theological experts and married persons appointed to advise the pope on the question.

Paul VI taught "that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life". Many Catholics in good conscience accepted the position set out in the Papal Commission's majority report of 1966 that "the morality of sexual acts between married people takes its meaning first of all and specifically from the ordering of their actions in a fruitful married life, that is one practised with responsible generous and prudent parenthood. It does not then depend upon the direct fecundity of each and every particular act". Their consciences are untroubled and even fortified by the fact that other Christian churches whose clergy are often married teach such an ethic. They find unconvincing Catholic hierarchical claims to superior insight into the natural law (as distinct from Revelation) when such insight is proclaimed to be available to every thinking person with insufficient regard for the experience of married Catholics, and contrary to the considered reflection on that experience by competent moral theologians. They are convinced that Pope Paul VI would not have overruled the majority of the Commission but for his conviction that the Church's previous teaching on the natural law of marriage could not be changed.

In his 1993 Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II stated:

Like the natural law itself and all practical knowledge, the judgment of conscience also has an imperative character: man must act in accordance with it. If man acts against this judgment or, in a case where he lacks certainty about the rightness and goodness of a determined act, still performs that act, he stands condemned by his own conscience, the proximate norm of personal morality.

The new Pope's published views on Conscience

In his 1972 lecture "Conscience in its Age", Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) took as

his starting point for reflection Hermann Rauschning's Conversations with Hitler in which Hitler pledged to liberate man "from the filthy and degrading torments inflicted on himself by a chimera called conscience and morality, and from the claims of a freedom and personal autonomy that only very few can ever be up to". The future Pope Benedict said:

The destruction of the conscience is the real precondition for totalitarian obedience and totalitarian domination. Where conscience prevails there is a barrier against the domination of human orders and human whim, something sacred that must remain inviolable and that in an ultimate sovereignty evades control not only by oneself but by every external agency. Only the absoluteness of conscience is the complete antithesis to tyranny; only the recognition of its inviolability protects human beings from each other and from themselves; only its rule guarantees freedom.

In his 1991 essay "Conscience and Truth", Ratzinger says, "It is of course undisputed that one must follow a certain conscience, or at least not act against it". Reflecting on actions of the SS during World War II, Ratzinger distinguishes conscience from "firm, subjective conviction and the lack of doubts and scruples" which do not justify man. Though one is obliged to follow an erroneous conscience, "conscience"s reduction to subjective certitude betokens at the same time a retreat from truth". Ratzinger happily adopts Newman"s approach to authority and conscience noting that Newman embraced "a papacy not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it". For Pope Benedict XVI:

The true sense of the 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.

© Council of Christians and Jews, Victoria

Priest and lawyer Frank Brennan SJ AO is Professor of Human Rights and Social Justice at the Institute of Legal Studies, ACU. He is well known for his services to Aboriginal Australians, with a long-standing interest in the contribution Christian Churches can make to the formulation of public policy in supporting marginalised groups.