

CONSCIENCE

No culture has yet been identified where the concept of conscience has not been recognized as central. The word 'conscience' was not always used: more common in early cultures were 'heart' and 'loins'. Whatever the word used, the concept behind conscience pointed to the core of the human person. The lack of a consistent word for the concept of conscience has led to diverse explanations. Despite this, the concept of conscience has maintained a consistent reference to human freedom. Through freedom, the practical conduct of life was discerned, and humans were formed to live responsibly as individuals and within society.

Origins

The Bible has no specific term for conscience, but by the New Testament there is an emerging spirit which emphasises that conscience is to be distinguished from the legal obedience typical of Rabbinic writings. A person's character and decisions are shaped by the heart and interior dispositions rather than by exterior obedience (cf. Mt 15:1-20, Lk 11:37-54). The insistence on purity of heart, under the caring eye of God, animates St Paul's presentation of Christian conscience. Paul does not give a systematic treatise, but clear emphases emerge from his writings. Conscience regulates a person's moral activity, so that whoever acts against conscience commits sin: conscience must always be followed even when in error (Rom 14:17-23). Of course, love of God and neighbour are the superior norms for Christian living, and a person may be occasionally required to forego a freedom that would be legitimate in different circumstances (1 Cor 8:1-13), though the inherent dignity of conscience is never questioned.

Historical Development

Given the variety of meanings and the lack of a systematic biblical presentation it is not surprising that the theological development of conscience is a maze of different views. For the tradition inherited by Redemptorists, the presentation of St Thomas Aquinas has a central importance. The analysis of Aquinas centres on the human intellect, operating through faith, which acquires the virtues necessary for a consistent life: pride of place is given to the cardinal virtue of prudence. Conscience becomes the spontaneous, indeed almost instinctive, application of prudential judgment to human living. Properly understood, this gives the possibility of identifying conscience with faith from which it primarily flows (*Summa Theologica*, Part One, Question 79).

Description

Though the theory of conscience in St Alphonsus is based on the axis of charity and prudence, as explained by St Thomas, Alphonsus' practical description of the term differs from that of his mentor. Two factors explain this. Alphonsus was trained as a lawyer, and he discusses problems of conscience through legal terminology rather than the scholastic terminology of Thomas. Secondly, there is the pastoral context within which Alphonsus developed his description of conscience. This was a period of theological wars about the system of morality best suited to respond to a troubled age. It is significant that Alphonsus regards conscience as the entry point to the study of moral theology (*Theologia Moralis*, Book 1, Chapter 1, Monitum).

Alphonsus followed the legal method of the manuals, but his description of conscience gives a tonality that has identified the followers of St Alphonsus since that time. Law constitutes the remote and material norm of human actions, while conscience is the proximate and formal norm of morality. In this description, one notes the foundational role of law, but the reason why Alphonsus regards

conscience as the entry point to moral theology is his pastoral interest in a particular question. The law exists, but has it been promulgated at the level of conscience? This cannot be presumed, and the description which Alphonsus gives to conscience is a complex system of principles and modes of application to establish this fact. Hence, in his description, one finds much discussion on doubt, error, scrupulosity, ignorance and the like.

Alphonsus gives sustained attention to these circumstances in order to establish whether the law, officially promulgated though it may seem, really applies in this case of conscience. Generally speaking, conscience should follow the dictates of the law, but the goodness of human action becomes known to a person through its approbation by conscience. The description of conscience in Alphonsus is a delicate balance of complex ideas. A person should always seek and follow truth in the exercise of human freedom. Conscience becomes the vital link in the chain between the truth of law and the necessary freedom of action for Alphonsus.

Pastoral Application

Conscience still remains the entry point for Redemptorists to moral theology, though the current contexts of our mission require new emphases. Preaching conversion is the determining norm (Const. 11-12) and preference for the abandoned poor is the critical principle of where and when to preach (Const. 5). With this norm and principle, Redemptorists will move away from the legalistic casuistry which replaced the dynamic description of conscience in Alphonsus. In our tradition, for instance in the *Codex Regularum et Constitutionum C.S.S.R.* (1894), one notes how Alphonsus' prudential dynamism of conscience had been reduced to external forms of obedience. Conscience became reduced to routine lists of preparation for confession or the Particular Examen. Though conscience is mentioned but once in the Constitutions and Statutes (Const. 41-2), the pastoral application of conscience is implied in the whole Constitutions with their sensitivity to the centrality of Christ, the dignity of all human persons and the call to plentiful redemption. These determine how conscience is pastorally applied.

Current Manifestations

Conversion-centred preaching, sensitive celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation, gentle spiritual direction, passionate commitment to social justice and courageous theological writing should be among the principal manifestations of the Redemptorist commitment to conscience. These ministries could eliminate sterile tensions within the Church between conscience and authority. They could also serve as a counterpoint to the individualistic reduction of conscience to private rights, evident in many cultures. Christians are obliged to follow their conscience: this means that we should be clearer on what conscience properly means. Besides re-reading the classic texts of Alphonsus, we should study *Gaudium et spes* 15-17, texts of the Second Vatican Council that owe much to the contribution of two great Redemptorists, Domenico Capone and Bernhard Häring.

SUGGESTED READING.

- Alphonsus de Liguori: *Theologia Moralis* (edited L. Gaudé), Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, Volume 1.
- Curran, Charles (edited): *Conscience*, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2004 (Readings in Moral Theology 14).
- Rey-Mermet, Théodule: *Moral Choices. The Moral Theology of Saint Alphonsus* (translated Paul Laverdure), Liguori MO: Liguori Publications, 1998.
- Vereecke, Louis: *De Guillaume d'Occam à Saint Alphonse de Liguori. Études d'histoire de la théologie morale moderne 1300-1789*. Rome: Collegium S. Alfonsi de Urbe, 1986.
- Vidal, Marciano: *La morale di Sant'Alfonso. Dal rigorismo alla benignità*. Rome: EDACALF, 2006 (2nd reprint).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What does the Catholic tradition mean when it says that one is bound to follow one's conscience?
2. What do you consider the main characteristics of the Redemptorist theological approach to conscience?
3. Why is there such tension within the Church between conscience and authority?
4. Is it correct to reduce conscience to the rights-claims of an individual?

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