

A Few Examples of Magisterial Teaching

Dogma: (Assent of Faith that this teaching is revealed by God.)

- The articles of the creed.
- The Christological dogmas.
- The Marian dogmas.
- Christ's institution of the sacraments and their efficacy to impart grace.
- The Real Presence.
- The sacrificial nature of the Mass.
- The divine foundation of the Church.
- The primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff.
- The existence of original sin.
- The immortality of the human soul.
- The immediate recompense after death.
- The inerrancy of Holy Scripture.
- The grave immorality of murder.

Definitive Doctrine: (The believer "accepts and holds" these teachings to be true.)

- The legitimacy of the election of a pope.
- The recognition of an ecumenical council.
- The perpetual virginity of the Blessed Mother.
- The canonizations of saints.
- The invalidity of Anglican (Protestant) orders.
- The primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff
- The moral teachings on the illicitness of prostitution and fornication.
- A male-only priesthood.

Into murkier waters:

Authoritative Doctrine: (The believer assimilates the teaching while recognizing the remote possibility of error.)

- Targeting of civilians during war.
- New medical technologies.
- New reproductive technologies.
- Treatment of prisoners (torture).

Prudential Judgments and Church Disciplines (Obedience, even when questioning the wisdom of the law.)

- Forbidding the use of nuclear weapons.
- Regulation of immigration and border control.*
- Celibate priesthood.
- Climate change.
- Laws on fasting and abstinence (no meat on Fridays in Lent).

* Catechism of the Catholic Church on Immigration

2241 The more prosperous nations are *obliged, to the extent they are able*, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him. Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (pp. 798-799), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Role of Conscience

Romans 1:21-25

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because *they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator*, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

CNN New Day, Dec. 26, 2013, Fr. Edward Beck, C.P.:

"And people don't know, but that really is catholic teaching. From Vatican II, the Catholic Church's thought, you need to act in accord with your informed conscience. And if it's goes against church law, church teaching, that's fine." (transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1312/26/nday.05.html)

Herman Goring:

"I have no conscience. My conscience is called Adolf Hitler."

Adolf Hitler:

"*Providence has ordained* that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing man from the restraints of an intelligence that has taken charge, from the dirty and degrading self-mortification of a false vision called conscience and morality, and from the demands of a freedom and independence which only a very few can bear." *"Hitler Speaks"*, by Hermann Rauschning, p. 222, 1939.

Albert Gorres, German psychotherapist (1918-1996), frequently cited to by Cdl. Ratzinger:

"All men need guilt feelings."

Psalm 19:12-13:

"But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from my unknown faults."

Catechism of the Catholic Church on Conscience

844 In their religious behavior, however, men also display the limits and errors that disfigure the image of God in them: Very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and served the creature rather than the Creator. Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair.

1776 “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”

1778 Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law: (1749) Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; I mean that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise.... [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.

1779 It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection: (1886)

II. The Formation of Conscience

1783 Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings. (2039)

1784 The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart. (1742)

IV. Erroneous Judgment 1790

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed. 1791 This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man “takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.” In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits. (1704)

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1792 Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct. 1793 If—on the contrary—the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience. (1860)

Catechism of the Catholic Church (pp. 660-661). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

On Conscience, by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, 1991

Presented at the 10th Workshop for Bishops February 1991 Dallas, Texas.

Downloaded from EWTN (with typographical errors)

In the contemporary discussion on what constitutes the essence of morality and how it can be recognized, the question of conscience has become paramount especially in the field of Catholic moral theology. This discussion centers on the concepts of freedom and norm, autonomy and heteronomy, self-determination and external determination by authority. Conscience appears here as the bulwark of freedom in contrast to the encroachments of authority on existence. In the course of this, two notions of the Catholic are set in opposition to each other. One is a renewed understanding of the Catholic essence which expounds Christian faith from the basis of freedom and as the very principle of freedom itself. The other is a superseded, "pre-conciliar" model which subjects Christian existence to authority, regulating life even into its most intimate preserves, and thereby attempts to maintain control over people's lives. Morality of conscience and morality of authority as two opposing models, appear to be locked in struggle with each other. Accordingly, the freedom of the Christian would be rescued by appeal to the classical principle of moral tradition that conscience is the highest norm which man is to follow even in opposition to authority. Authority in this case, the Magisterium, may well speak of matters moral, but only in the sense of presenting conscience with material for its own deliberation. Conscience would retain, however, the final word. Some authors reduce conscience in this its aspect of final arbiter to the formula: conscience is infallible.

Nonetheless, at this point, a contradiction can arise. It is of course undisputed that one must follow a certain conscience or at least not act against it. But whether the judgment of conscience or what one takes to be such, is always right, indeed whether it is infallible, is another question. For if this were the case, it would mean that there is no truth—at least not in moral and religious matters, which is to say, in the areas which constitute the very pillars of our existence. For judgments of conscience can contradict each other. Thus there could be at best the subject's own truth, which would be reduced to the subject's sincerity. No door or window would lead from the subject into the broader world of being and human solidarity. Whoever thinks this through will come to the realization that no real freedom exists then and that the supposed pronouncements of conscience are but the reflection of social circumstances. This should necessarily lead to the conclusion that placing freedom in opposition to authority overlooks something. There must be something deeper, if freedom and, therefore, human existence are to have meaning.

1. A Conversation On The Erroneous Conscience and First Inferences

It has become apparent that the question of conscience leads in fact to the core of the moral problem and thus to the question of man's existence itself. I would now like to pursue this question not in the form of a strictly conceptual and therefore unavoidably abstract presentation, but by way of narrative, as one might say today, by relating, to begin with, the story of my own encounter with this problem. I first became aware of the question with all its urgency in the beginning of my academic teaching. In the course of a dispute, a senior colleague, who was keenly aware of the plight to being Christian in our times, expressed the opinion that one should actually be grateful to God that He allows there to be so many unbelievers in good conscience. For if their eyes were opened and they became believers, they would not be capable, in this world of ours, of bearing the burden of faith with all its moral obligations. But as it is, since they can go another way in good conscience, they can reach salvation. What shocked me about this assertion was not in the first place the idea of an erroneous conscience given by God Himself in order to save men by means of such artfulness—the idea, so to speak, of a blindness sent by God for the salvation of those in question. What disturbed me was the notion that it harbored, that faith is a burden which can hardly be borne and which no doubt was intended only for stronger natures—faith almost as a kind of punishment, in any case, an imposition not easily coped with. According to this view, faith would not make salvation easier but harder. Being happy would mean not being burdened with having to believe or having to submit to the moral yoke of the faith of the Catholic church. The erroneous conscience, which makes life easier and marks a more human course, would then be a real grace, the normal way to salvation. Untruth, keeping truth at bay, would be better for man than truth. It would not be the truth that would set him free, but rather he would have to be freed from the truth. Man would be more at home in the dark than in the light. Faith would not be the good gift of the good God but instead an affliction. If this were the state of affairs, how could faith give rise to joy? Who would have the courage to pass faith on to others? Would it not be better to spare them the truth or even keep them from it? In the last few decades, notions of this sort have discernibly crippled the disposition to evangelize. The one who sees the faith as a heavy burden or as a moral imposition is unable to invite others to believe. Rather he lets them be, in the putative freedom of their good consciences.

The one who spoke in this manner was a sincere believer, and, I would say, a strict Catholic who performed his moral duty with care and conviction. But he expressed a form of experience of faith which is disquieting. Its propagation could only be fatal to the faith. The almost traumatic aversion many have to what they hold to be "pre-conciliar" Catholicism is rooted, I am convinced, in the encounter with such a faith seen only as encumbrance. In this regard, to be sure, some very basic questions arise. Can such a faith actually be an encounter with truth? Is the truth about God and man so sad and difficult, or does truth not lie in the overcoming of such legalism? Does it not lie in freedom? But where does freedom lead? What course does it chart for us? At the conclusion, we shall come back to these fundamental problems of Christian existence today but before we do that, we must return to the core of our topic, namely, the matter of conscience. As I said, what unsettled me in the argument just recounted was first of all the caricature of faith I perceived in it. In a second course of reflection, it occurred to me further that the concept of conscience which it implied must also be wrong. The erroneous conscience, by sheltering the person from the exacting demands of truth, saves him ...—thus went the argument. Conscience appeared here not as a window through which one can see outward to that common truth which founds

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and sustains us all, and so makes possible through the common recognition of truth, the community of needs and responsibilities. Conscience here does not mean man's openness to the ground of his being, the power of perception for what is highest and most essential. Rather, it appears as subjectivity's protective shell into which man can escape and there hide from reality. Liberalism's idea of conscience was in fact presupposed here. Conscience does not open the way to the redemptive road to truth which either does not exist or, if it does, is too demanding. It is the faculty which dispenses from truth. It thereby becomes the justification for subjectivity, which should not like to have itself called into question. Similarly, it becomes the justification for social conformity. As mediating value between the different subjectivities, social conformity is intended to make living together possible. The obligation to seek the truth ceases, as do any doubts about the general inclination of society and what it has become accustomed to. Being convinced of oneself, as well as conforming to others, are sufficient. Man is reduced to his superficial conviction and the less depth he has, the better for him.

What I was only dimly aware of in this conversation became glaringly clear a little later in a dispute among colleagues about the justifying power of the erroneous conscience. Objecting to this thesis, someone countered that if this were so then the Nazi SS would be justified and we should seek them in heaven since they carried out all their atrocities with fanatic conviction and complete certainty of conscience. Another responded with utmost assurance that of course this was indeed the case. There is no doubting the fact that Hitler and his accomplices who were deeply convinced of their cause, could not have acted otherwise. Therefore, the objective terribleness of their deeds notwithstanding, they acted morally, subjectively speaking. Since they followed their albeit mistaken consciences, one would have to recognize their conduct as moral and, as a result, should not doubt their eternal salvation. Since that conversation, I knew with complete certainty that something was wrong with the theory of justifying power of the subjective conscience, that, in other words, a concept of conscience which leads to such conclusions must be false. For, subjective conviction and the lack of doubts and scruples which follow therefrom do not justify man. Some thirty years later, in the terse words of the psychologist, Albert Gorres, I found summarized the perceptions I was trying to articulate. The elaboration of these insights forms the heart of this address. Gorres shows that the feeling of guilt, the capacity to recognize guilt, belongs essentially to the spiritual make-up of man. This feeling of guilt disturbs the false calm of conscience and could be called conscience's complaint against my self-satisfied existence. It is as necessary for man as the physical pain which signifies disturbances of normal bodily functioning. Whoever is no longer capable of perceiving guilt is spiritually ill, a "living corpse, a dramatic character's mask," as Gorres says. "Monsters, among other brutes, are the ones without guilt feelings. Perhaps Hitler did not have any, or Himmler, or Stalin. Maybe Mafia bosses do not have any guilt feelings either, or maybe their remains are just well hidden in the cellar. Even aborted guilt feelings ... All men need guilt feelings."


By the way, a look into Sacred Scripture should have precluded such diagnoses and such a theory of justification by the errant conscience. In Psalm 19:12-13, we find the ever worth pondering passage: "But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from my unknown faults." That is not Old Testament objectivism, but profoundest human wisdom. No longer seeing one's guilt, the falling silent of conscience in so many areas, is an even more dangerous sickness of the soul than the guilt which one still recognizes as such. He who no longer notices that killing is a sin has fallen farther than the one who still recognizes the shameful of his actions, because the former is further removed from the truth and conversion.

Not without reason does the self-righteous man in the encounter with Jesus appear as the one who is really lost. If the tax collector with all his undisputed sins stands more justified before God than the Pharisee with all his undeniably good works (Lk 18:9-14), this is not because the sins of the tax collector were not sins or the good deeds of the Pharisee not good deeds. Nor does it mean that the good that man does is not good before God, or the evil not evil or at least not particularly important. The reason for this paradoxical judgment of God is shown precisely from our question. The Pharisee no longer knows that he too has guilt. He has a completely clear conscience. But this silence of conscience makes him impenetrable to God and men, while the cry of conscience which plagues the tax collector makes him capable of truth and love. Jesus can move sinners. Not hiding behind the screen of their erroneous consciences, they have not become unreachable for the change which God expects of them, and of us. He is ineffective with the "righteous," because they are not aware of any need for forgiveness and conversion. Their consciences no longer accuse them but justify them.

We find something similar in Saint Paul who tells us, that the pagans, even without the law, knew quite well what God expected of them (Rom 2:1- 16). The whole theory of salvation through ignorance breaks apart with this verse. There is present in man the truth that is not to be repulsed, that one truth of the creator which in the revelation of salvation history has also been put in writing. Man can see the truth of God from the fact of his creaturehood. Not to see it is guilt. It is not seen because man does not want to see it. The "no" of the will which hinders recognition is guilt. The fact that the signal lamp does not shine is the consequence of a deliberate looking away from that which we do not wish to see.

At this point in our reflections, it is possible to draw some initial conclusions with a view toward answering the question regarding the essence of conscience. We can now say, it will not do to identify man's conscience with the self-consciousness of the "I", with its subjective certainty about itself and its moral behavior. On the one hand, this consciousness may be a mere reflection of the social surroundings and the opinions in vogue. On the other hand, it might also derive from a lack of self-criticism, a deficiency in listening to the depth of one's own soul. This diagnosis is confirmed by what has come to light since the fall of Marxist systems in eastern Europe. The noblest and keenest minds of the liberated peoples speak of an enormous spiritual devastation which appeared in the years of the intellectual deformation. They speak of a blunting of the moral sense which is more significant loss and danger than the economic damage which was done. The new patriarch of Moscow stressed this poignantly in the summer of 1990. The power of perception of people who lived in a system of deception was darkened. The society lost the capacity for mercy, and human feelings were forsaken. A whole generation was lost for the good, lost for humane needs. "We must lead society back to the eternal moral values," that is to say, open ears almost gone deaf, so that once again the promptings of God might be heard in human hearts. Error, the "erring," conscience, is only at first convenient. But then the silencing of conscience leads to the dehumanization of the world and to moral danger, if one does not work against it.

To put it differently, the identification of conscience with superficial consciousness, the reduction of man to his subjectivity, does not liberate but enslaves. It makes us totally dependent on the prevailing opinions and debases these with every passing day. Whoever equates conscience with superficial conviction, identifies conscience with a pseudo-rational certainty, a certainty which in fact has been woven from self-righteousness, conformity and lethargy. Conscience is degraded to a mechanism for



rationalization while it should represent the transparency of the subject for the divine and thus constitute the very dignity and greatness of man. Conscience's reduction to subjective certitude betokens at the same time a retreat from truth. When the psalmist in anticipation of Jesus' view of sin and justice pleads for liberation from unconscious guilt, he points to the following relation. **Certainly, one must follow an erroneous conscience. But the departure from truth which took place beforehand and now takes its revenge is the actual guilt which first lulls man into false security and then abandons him in the trackless waste.**

Conclusions

1776 "Deep within his **conscience** man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey.

From the monastic rule of Saint Basil:

"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 of "the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us."

"We have received interiorly beforehand the capacity and disposition for observing all divine commandments ... These are not something imposed from without."

J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011.

"The love of God which 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."

St. 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."

Remember the words of the article from *Church Life Journal*:

Reading and analyzing papal documents takes considerable practice, even for the most seasoned theologian.