

# **Conscience and Freedom**

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## 00. INTRODUCTION

Authority and truth are in crisis today. And so, therefore, is conscience.

Authority is in crisis. The modern man`s attitude towards authority is highly critical. The very idea of authority seems offensive to his sense of freedom and personality. His instinctive reaction to authority is to reject it.

Truth is in crisis. Modern man is skeptical as to the existence of any real or objective truth - about man, about his destiny, about the worth of his actions.

There is perhaps one truth modern man still believes - in the truth of science. This is the one God he still believes in and follows - though recently he has begun to lose his conviction that he is following a benevolent God who will lead him to his own fulfilment and happiness. He is in fact beginning to be afraid of this God of science and technology. His God still leads on self-confidently. And man still follows - but at a distance, more and more reluctantly, with a growing sense of being alone and lost, of not being able to know himself or help himself. For this is the tense paradox of modern man. As never before he has discovered and mastered the truth about things. The truth about himself has never seemed to elude him more.

Yet man remains the one being in the universe that makes conscious choices. He cannot escape the burden of choice. Nor - without deceiving himself - can he escape the sense that his choices *matter*, at least for his own life. Therefore, inevitably, he looks for some standard by which to measure the worth and direction of his choices. Having rejected the standard of external authority and that of

objective truth, the only standard that remains to him *is his own conscience*. But if he takes the idea of conscience seriously, if he examines his own conscience seriously, he will find that his conscience too is in crisis.

If there is no external authority that can be trusted, if there is no objective truth in things (or if conscience cannot grasp it), then conscience itself is in a critical state. For there is nothing to show that conscience can be taken seriously. There is no proof that conscience itself can be trusted.

Can I trust my conscience'? The man who takes his life seriously must be in crisis unless he can find a positive answer to this question.

Can I trust my conscience? It is true that some people today answer the question with a confident and unqualified Yes to the point that they appear to endow personal conscience, in its role as a guide, with the very quality they indignantly deny to the guidance of Church or Pope: the quality of infallibility. 'Supremacy of conscience' is a principle they frequently invoke, using it precisely as if it meant infallibility of conscience, whereas it does not and clearly cannot mean any such thing. Trust in conscience is simply a dogma for them,

a blind and irrational dogma, for they can give absolutely no reasons to support it. It is only by being superficial that they can seem content with their unthinking trust in conscience. If they were to question their own position, to probe a little below the surface, if they were in fact to question their own conscience, sincerely and in depth, they would plunge themselves into crisis.

Can I trust my conscience'? The man, the 'modern' man, who trusts no external authority, who believes in no



objective truth, and yet who wishes to take himself seriously, who is prepared to take the voice of conscience seriously, has no grounds to give any other answer to his question than No. There lies his crisis.

Can I trust my conscience? The Christian answer is Yes--and No. I must follow my conscience, and if I follow it sincerely--testingly-- I can be confident that it will lead me to a growing knowledge of the truth. But the Christian concept of conscience is at the same time impregnated with the idea that conscience is a *fallible* guide. It may go wrong. It may take the wrong road, and take me with it. Therefore I need constantly to test the principles operating in my conscience, lest false principles -pride or prejudice, for instance-begin to dominate it and to lead me astray.

If man is in crisis until he can find an answer to the question 'Can I trust my conscience?', the Christian answer 'Yes; and No' clearly solves the crisis *only in part*. This is as it ought to be. A man should always follow his conscience (when it speaks clearly), but he should never be satisfied with it. It can too easily be misinformed[1]. As we have said, conscience may be supreme, but it is not infallible. It can in fact never give good service to anyone who is not aware that it is indeed a guide to be followed, but a fallible guide. Only if a man learns to appreciate both the greatness and the delicacy of conscience, only if he learns to obey it and to question it, to listen to it and to form it, will conscience serve him well.

## NOTES

[1] We have a grave duty to follow our conscience. We have, however, an equally grave duty to *form* our conscience. These two duties bind us always. Further, they are co-relative duties; i.e. insofar as we are not continually

trying to form our conscience, we are, to that extent, depriving ourselves of the right to feel at ease in following our conscience.

## 01. CONSCIENCE AND TRUTH

'What is the truth?' (Jn 18:38). Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus expresses the scepticism not only of a Roman but of so many men of the twentieth century. 'What is the truth?', by the very tone of voice with which he put the question, Pilate probably tried to make it clear that he didn't really expect an answer. In his heart of hearts, perhaps he didn't really want an answer. The fact is that he didn't wait for one: 'He went out' (Jn *ibid.*), and so deprived mankind of what would have been one of its rarest treasures: a definition of truth from the lips of Truth itself.

Reading the Gospel account of this Judgment scene, we sense that Pilate had begun to feel the attraction of Jesus' personality. If he suddenly breaks off the conversation and takes refuge in scepticism, it is because Jesus--at the very moment when his life depended on gaining the Roman Governor's favor--had bluntly brought up this matter of the truth, in the most unpalatable and uncompromising terms: 'This is why I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. And everyone who is on the side of the truth listens to my voice' (Jn 18:37).

Our Lord's words, before the man who is about to judge him, are very clear. When he speaks of the truth, he means (and we feel that Pilate understands him to mean) something objective, not something subjective; not mere opinion which men can debate, but truth that is valid for all. He makes the truth (the revealing of the truth) the purpose of his mission to men; just as he makes the truth (the acceptance of the truth) the test of allegiance to him.

His words are very clear--so much so that all those who understand Christianity as the following of Jesus Christ

must realize clearly that to follow Jesus means to accept and to follow an objective standard of truth.

Our Lord's words are very clear. So also is the contrast between his position and Pilate's. He was really inviting Pilate--as he invites all men--to accept his standard of the truth. But the invitation was too much for Pilate. In his skepticism, he had no time for such dogmatism; or perhaps, in his prejudices, he had no time to try to understand it. He was perfectly clear about one thing--as are so many people today--that there is no such thing as *the* truth. at least in matters of religious belief or moral conduct; no such thing as the truth about man's nature or origin or destiny or the worth of his actions. No objective truth exists on these questions. All that exists is subjective opinion, individual choice, personal preference. And no one has the right to say that anyone else's beliefs or actions are better or worse, truer or falser, than his own.

## **Conscientious rights and objective truth**

Christ and Pilate were speaking on different wavelengths. There was an immense gap between their two minds. If modern man is as skeptical as Pilate about the existence of objective religious or moral truth, does this not mean that there is an equally immense gap between the mind of Christ and that of modern man?

Perhaps. But it is also possible that modern man, or at least modern Western man, has one important advantage over Pilate, an advantage that is worth considering. We know nothing of Pilate's views on conscience, specifically on the rights of individual conscience. As a Roman governor, a practically absolute ruler in his province, he probably didn't believe in them. In the case before him, our Lord's own case, he certainly didn't respect them. Modern man,

however, even though he may claim not to believe in any objective truth, does believe strongly in the rights of conscience.

Now if one reflects on this, one discovers an inconsistency, a very hopeful inconsistency which suggests precisely that modern man is not in practice so absolutely skeptical about the possibility of objective truth as he thinks himself to be, or as we may think him to be.

In effect, all those who invoke the rights of conscience --e.g. as against the authority of the State--are appealing to some standard of justice that, for them, stands higher and is truer than any man-made disposition or law.

Those who campaign against class prejudice, racial discrimination, mass genocide, colonialism, imperialism, or atomic warfare, do so in the firm belief that these things are wrong--even if a particular group or government or law approves them; that they are wrong always and everywhere; that they are wrong and cannot be willed, or legislated, to be right; that they are wrong in themselves and that no collective will, and no individual will, can make them right.

But it is not possible to maintain this position unless one believes in a *higher truth* - an objective truth - that stands above laws and Parliaments and demands their respect; a *higher truth* that stands equally above the will of any individual and demands his respect also.

This last point perhaps needs to be emphasized. The civil rights movement cannot be interpreted as a campaign to free each individual from loyalty or subjection to the State, and to make the individual will supreme. If it were, then no one would have the right to protest, for example, against the actions of Pilate or Hitler, who after all

were certainly following their own individual will, and were presumably following their own subjective 'truth' and, according to such an interpretation, would have been right to do so.

Genuine civil rights protests are made in the name of humanity, i.e. in the name of a *higher truth valid for the human race* and demanding respect from all men. The essential philosophy of the civil rights movement demands a *higher court of appeal*--a court of more ultimate truth--where the morality (the truth or falsehood, the rightness or wrongness) of laws and actions can be finally judged.

## **The Catholic and Protestant conscience**

This idea, that there exists a truth which is higher than man-made laws or individual choices--and which should be respected by them--was universal in Christendom until the sixteenth century. The Reformation did not, at first, seem to affect this Christian belief in the existence of an objective and ultimate truth, standing outside man's mind, standing higher than man's mind, and existing even if some or many men fail to see it or fail to respect it. As a movement so largely in revolt against authority, the Reformation was bound eventually to create a crisis about the objective nature of truth (for truth and authority are intimately connected. Yet, we repeat, it did not at first seem to affect the basic Christian confidence in the objective truth. It simply sought to modify the means by which, in religious and moral matters, the individual was to attain that truth. There was now the Catholic and the Protestant approach to this question; there was, in morality, the Catholic and the Protestant conscience.

The Catholic conscience supplemented its intimate efforts to distinguish between right and wrong by looking to

externally-given norms which, as coming from God himself (speaking, with authority, not only in his Incarnation but also in his continued life in his Church), it welcomed as certainly true.

The Protestant conscience, in its sensitivity to moral truth, was offered the aid and apparent guarantee of an external objective norm, that of our Lord's teaching in Scripture. But, in practice, this was to have less and less value, for the 'objective' norm of the Gospel was subordinated to the ultimate 'guaranteeing' principle of Protestantism, that of private judgment.

Despite this principle, however it is true to say that, at the time of the Reformation and for long after, the Reformed ethic did not wish to deny the existence of the objective truth of the norms of morality, but simply said that the knowledge of these norms may be attained by a personal or private (and therefore, in the end, by a *subjective*) interpretation of the teaching of Christ.

In other words, the Catholic believed that the ultimate guide to personal conscience, as it endeavours to find religious and moral truth by applying our Lord's teaching to human life, lay in an external authority and tradition guaranteed by God, while the Protestant believed that the ultimate guide to personal conscience in interpreting or applying the Gospel must be conscience itself.

Two contrasting concepts of conscience, then, and of the relation of conscience to the truth. Two contrasting concepts of conscience: each wishing to be sensitive to the truth, but one with a tendency and a disposition to check whatever presented itself from within as the voice of truth against an external and objective authority, and the other

with an ultimate tendency to subordinate whatever spoke authoritatively from outside (Scripture, Tradition) to an interior and personal interpretation; the Catholic conscience with a tendency to look *outwards* (and upwards) to external norms which represent a final occur of judgment sustained by a divine guarantee, and the Protestant conscience with an ultimate tendency to look *inwards* where, in the last analysis, the voice of God speaks in the depths of each individual soul.

The difference between these two concepts is enormous. Nevertheless, they still had a very important meeting-ground in common, insofar as both not only *accepted the existence of objective truth*, but regarded conscience as a faculty capable of arriving at this truth. Both, in other words, regarded conscience as a *truth-seeking faculty* (and, naturally, a truth-finding faculty). [1]

This *is* a very important meeting ground. One perhaps only realizes its importance by considering the situation when it disappears, when the Private Judgment position reaches a point - to which its development tends inevitably to take it- where *faith in the existence of objective truth is gone*.

## **Can conscience create the truth?**

It is vital to grasp this difference between the original Protestant position and what one might call the modern post-Protestant attitude which prevails in Western liberal (or post-liberal) societies and influences the thinking of all of us. The original Protestant position simply held that man's mind or conscience is capable of finding truth - religious and moral truth- 'on its own', without having to follow any external guide. The important thing here is that this position still allows, at least in theory, the existence of a



truth that conscience can relate to. It accepts, so to speak, the *pre-existence* of truth in relation to conscience.

It is a very different thing indeed to hold, however obscurely, that conscience determines or creates truth. This is in fact the real position of many people today. Freedom of conscience--freedom to seek the truth--is nowadays being made synonymous with 'autonomy' of conscience--freedom to 'create' the truth...

There is of course an intrinsic absurdity in the concept of a 'truth-creating' faculty. Insofar as it can be used, however, it shows the infinite rift between the modern positivistic-sceptic mind and the Catholic mind. Once truth is thought of as something that can be create one is clearly talking about something totally different from what a Catholic means by truth.

One doesn't create truth. Truth is uncreated. It is not an invention of man. It may be *discovered* by him, but not invented. It is not subordinated to man or to his conscience. The truth is higher than conscience and independent of it. The man who denies this, who makes truth in some way subordinated to his own mind, who is prepared to treat it as the subjective creation of his own mind, is not talking about the truth at all. He should use a different term: value judgment, personal standard, or perhaps personal interest or preference or convenience...

## **Conscience must look up to truth**

Truth is independent of conscience. But conscience is not independent of truth. In your conscientious choices, you don't really choose the truth as if it were *one truth presenting itself out of several possible truths*. One truth, one only, presents itself to the mind as true, and you either

accept it or you reject it. But even if you reject it, it remains present to you as true. You cannot get rid of it. However, much you try to subject it to your mind, you fail. For the truth is stronger than your mind.

In the face of its strength a man may turn away, avert his mind from it, declare it out of bounds, closed to further mental consideration... But in effect, by this he maims his mind. You cannot manipulate the truth, you cannot create your own truths. You can only do that with falsehood.

Of course, many men make their own falsehoods and call them true. Falsehood can indeed be manipulated. It is quite malleable. It is easily subordinated to the human mind. For it is the product of the human mind. But the truth stands above man. It is God's product.

Truth, therefore, real truth, is always greater than the human mind. It must be respected and sought with humility. It must be looked up to. A man is really acting according to his conscience only when he is looking up in his actions, when he is following a standard of truth *that is above him*, that he respects and tries to measure up to. [2]

If conscience is to preserve its proper nature as a truth-seeking faculty, it must preserve this attitude of humility. Pride is always trying to assert itself. If it is permitted to do so, it will tend to adopt an attitude of *domination* towards the truth. And it is then that conscience emerges with the pretensions of a truthcreating faculty.

## **The original temptation**

The biggest human dilemma in fact lies in how to approach the truth: whether to treat it humbly or

dominatingly. The most basic temptation is found here As is the most basic sin--the original sin, that is at the origin of all Sin and consists in yielding to the temptation to manipulate, to dominate, the truth.

It is peculiar that some Christians today seem to find such difficulty in the biblical account of Original Sin.

The account, the whole doctrine, of course makes no sense if one reads it as the colossal punishment of a trivial act of disobedience towards a quite arbitrary command. The whole thing then appears as a sort of deliberate snare set by God in the ridiculous matter of a protected apple-tree.

But that is not at all the way it appears in Genesis. The Bible uses symbolic terms, there can be no doubt about that. But symbolic terms about issues that could scarcely be clearer or more radical.

Let us recall the situation. God has commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of one tree: not an

I apple tree, but the tree 'of the knowledge of good and evil'. This tree - of a species unknown to our orchards - is clearly a symbol; and the taking of its fruit is clearly a symbol. Symbols of what'?

Consider the temptation. God had warned Adam and Eve not to eat or touch the forbidden fruit - 'lest you die'. The devil tells them, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be *like* God, knowing good and evil.' These last words contain the real temptation, and suggest the greatness of the sin to which they were being tempted.

What exactly are these words getting at? Adam and Eve already knew good. They knew that God was good, and that everything willed by God must be good, and anything against his will must be evil. They knew then that to disobey him would be evil. But they were being tempted not just to disobey one isolated and rather petty expression of God's will. They were being tempted, in their minds, to the greatest possible sin of pride against divine and uncreated Truth. They were being tempted to reject--or rather to think they could reject--the limitations of creaturehood, the necessary subordination of the creature's mind to objective truth. They were being tempted to manipulate and abuse the truth, to think that the truth can be divided and cut off from its one source and given a new and autonomous existence, that there can be several truths, one standing against another, that the creature's 'truth' should have equal and democratic rights with the Creator's Truth.

It was the temptation to adopt their own standard of right and wrong, to let their own mind (or perhaps, more accurately, their preference) be the standard of good and evil. It was the temptation to be 'like God', determining, legislating, creating good and evil.

It was the temptation of the autonomous conscience. It was a peculiarly modern temptation.

Let us be clear on this. Adam and Eve were not simply being tempted with the suggestion that they could know - i.e. discover - the truth 'on their own'. They were not being tempted to be 'discoverers' of the truth (truth discovered leads to the true God), but to be 'creators', 'inventors', of the truth ('truth' invented - i.e. falsehood - is a false god or serves a false god).

## **Making abortion 'right'**

How clearly one can see this false idea of the truth today as if it were an arbitrary product of man's will (or even an *arbitrary* product of God's will! What a false idea in fact Adam and Eve had of the relationship between God and truth!).

How easily modern man would solve moral and social problems: 'Let this be the truth. Let this be right. No; now this other thing...' This positivistic attitude is deeply rooted in current thinking.

Abortion was 'wrong' in Britain only a few years ago. In 1967 the British Parliament (by a vote, in fact, of less than fifty per cent of the elected representatives of the people) *legalized* it. Therefore abortion has now become *right*. A new truth has emerged, has been created, and pushed out the old. The old truth has been abolished.

If *Humanae Vitae* was such a stumbling-block to the minds of many people - many Catholics included - it was not necessarily because they were absolutely convinced by the arguments in favor of artificial birth-control, but that they were scandalized at the thought of one man with the power (so it seemed to them) to legislate 'the truth', to change what had been wrong into what could now be right, by a mere 'fiat', by a simple act of his will - *and refusing to do it!*

## **Conscience versus community?**

The idea that individual conscience lies above the truth, and that therefore each man can construct his own world of good and evil, his own system of right and wrong, within his autonomous conscience, leads to individualism, isolationism, lack of solidarity, rejection of community; and

is, inevitably and in the end, destructive of the very idea of humanity.

If each man's mind is supreme, then all men have potentially different standards, they find no links in a shared humanity, there is no common ground between them. Dialogue and trust become impossible. Mankind fragments.

If men cannot *look up together* to God - or at least to a higher truth - then they will not for long be able to think or work or act or live together.

If modern man, in ever greater numbers, seems to be despairing of that 'togetherness' which was so generally sought only a very few years ago, if he no longer trusts the larger communities of State or Church, if so much of life appears to him as a 'rat-race', if he looks with 'suspicion on his fellow-men, if he seems increasingly skeptical even about life within the more intimate community of the family, if he finds himself being pushed-or drifting more and more out on his own, one wonders if this may not be the final stage of disintegration of a humanity where minds, having first lost regard for, have finally lost sight of, their one common meeting ground--the truth.

[1] Strictly speaking, as we have said earlier, conscience is that faculty for making judgments in relation to the rightness or wrongness of one's conduct, i.e. in relation to practical moral truth. Conscience therefore cannot operate except on the basis of a grasp of truth (or what it takes to be truth), and this means that in practice it must maintain a certain attitude towards the question of truth. This is why I introduce and would wish to underline the enormously important distinction between the 'truth-seeking' attitude and the 'truth-creating' attitude; the attitude of respect or the attitude of domination in relation to the truth. Some

philosophically-minded readers may feel that at this stage one is speaking of a function of the intelligence rather than of conscience. I would not argue the point, since I feel that the distinction is not important to the non-philosophical reader.

[2] He is not acting according to conscience if he is acting simply according to convenience, shaping his actions to suit his pride or interest or pleasure; or perhaps, rather, shaping his principles to suit his actions. The man of flexible principles is in constant danger of becoming a man of no principles at all.

## 02. FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

### *The fear of being influenced*

The fear of being influenced is one of the most characteristic fears of our age. It is healthy for a man to be on his guard against undue influence or bad influence. But the fear of influence of any type is clearly unhealthy. Today it has practically reached the level of being a neurosis. It is unhealthy among other reasons because in practice it is quite impossible for a man to avoid being influenced. All he can do is to try to distinguish between positive and helpful influences, and negative or harmful influences; and to welcome the former and resist the latter.

We are being influenced whether we like it or not or are aware of it or not. We are being influenced by fashion, by views expressed in newspapers or on television, by the comments and even the attitudes of our friends, etc. We are being influenced in our thinking, in our standards, and therefore also in our consciences. For if conscience can be defined as a faculty of moral judgment that distinguishes between right and wrong, it evidently must judge according to some standard or standards. There is a basic innate standard to conscience, what we might call a certain instinct of rightness and wrongness (the scholastic 'synderesis'). But in the main these standards are developed precisely under the influences that surround us and affect us from earliest days: home, school, environment, friends, reading, etc.

No one goes through life with unchanged moral standards. Some of the standards one originally held are matured and confirmed and intensified. Others perhaps give way to completely new ones. And so our conscience the



elements of judgment which make up our criterion of right and wrong is constantly being formed and reformed.

All education, just as all advertising or all political propaganda, is designed to influence. The aim of education is to inculcate a grasp of facts or principles that will make a person better prepared for life. Moral education, concretely, is designed to inculcate principles of conduct. In this sense moral education is the aim of parents, teachers, youth leaders, civil rights campaigners, etc.

All education which seeks to inculcate some moral or civic code is aimed therefore at *forming* conscience, at increasing our sensitivity to right or wrong. However, the influences operating on the development of conscience are not necessarily always formative. They can be deformative—as, for instance, in the case of the parent or teacher who implants racial prejudice, or a sense of social snobbery or of class warfare.

So there is a right way and a wrong way of forming the individual conscience. There are right norms to be inculcated; or wrong ones. People of course differ as to which exactly are the right norms, and which are the wrong; what exactly makes for a right, an enlightened, conscience in one man; and what makes for a wrong or erroneous conscience in another.

The traditional Catholic idea is that a conscience is right when it tends to judge in accordance with objective truth. It is wrong when the principles by which it judges are, objectively speaking, false. [1]

Formation of conscience, therefore, is that process by which true principles of conduct gradually become operative in a person's mind, by which his mind gradually takes hold of true principles. Deformation of conscience is

the process by which false principles gradually come to shape and govern the working of the mind.

## **When conscience protests**

The grasp of right principles is the first condition of the sound formation of conscience. But an equally important condition is *to live according to these principles*. In other words, conscience also tends to be formed by living according to conscience: and conscience tends to be deformed by living contrary to conscience. To hold certain principles in one's conscience, and then to act against them, is of the essence of moral evil or sin. Every man who knows himself has had the experience of sinning, of choosing something which his conscience tells him to be wrong.

In such case, when the will chooses against the conscience, it may not be content with a break-away movement. It may attempt a take-over. It may try to manipulate conscience, to bend conscience to principles that suit its choice.

Let us examine this further. Conscience judges that something is morally good, and ought to be done. For instance, a man feels he must tell the truth, even though, in his circumstances, he finds this very difficult. But the will is free. In his will, he may decide otherwise. He may choose to lie. To lie, of course, in such a case appears to the will as something good (not as a moral good, but as a good in the sense that it offers some immediate relief or satisfaction). Conscience may oppose this choice of the will, retaining a clear awareness that, at a deeper level, such a choice is not good. Or conscience may, after a debate, acquiesce for a moment, allowing that it seems good. But usually, this acquiescence is short-lived. Once the will is satisfied in its

object, its demands subside, the mind can review the situation in greater freedom and objectivity, and then conscience speaks with its voice of judgment: 'That was wrong'. And so, the will stands accused. A man cannot shake off the awareness, 'I did wrong'.

But if a man acquires the habit of sinning, if he lets his will habitually choose wrong in a particular area of conduct, then the temptation will be strong to want to find a way of silencing the accusing voice of conscience, and so letting the will out of dock...

This is the crisis point. The will may, so to speak, 'plot' against mind and conscience. It may try to make the mind dwell on 'reasons' that seem to justify the conduct in question. And it may succeed in its attempt.

For of course the will can choose an intellectual act as the object of its desire. Just as, for instance, it can choose to dwell on the truth taught by the Church - and on all the supernatural and human motives in favor of accepting it as true - so it can choose to dwell on some error, and on the arguments that seem to support that error

Conscience will protest initially. It will put up a fight; all the more strongly because it is a fight where the ultimate issue may well be its own survival, its own independence and freedom.

But if the will wins, and if a man lets his will win time and again, they by dint of dwelling on the attractive points of error, he can cloud his own mind and deaden his conscience. If a man lets his conscience down in this fight, he ends up not with a free conscience but with one that is enslaved to his (bad) will; one that is ready to fall in with

and approve anything the will wants. Such a man has lost his freedom of conscience.

## **Supremacy of conscience**

That great Englishman, Cardinal Newman, is frequently invoked today, and rightly so, as one of the main modern exponents of the 'supremacy of conscience'. His Letter to the Duke of Norfolk (1874) contains the famous phrase, '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'. [2]

To understand this vigorous expression, one should recall that conscience is not a sort of intermediary between God and man, as Calvin suggested, nor is it simply a moral sense or instinct, peculiar to each individual. Conscience is a judgment of our reason which indicates what is right or wrong in our conduct. Our mind is capable of knowing both the true nature of things as well as the fact that they can only find their fulfillment in God. And on the basis of this knowledge, conscience commands us imperatively not to turn created things, or ourselves, away from God. Therein lies its supremacy. But this point must be seen clearly in the light of the fact that knowledge is necessarily conditioned by reality: that any 'knowledge' which ignores or mistakes the real nature of things, as established by God, is not true knowledge. The subjective supremacy of conscience, therefore, is closely related to and dependent on that other objective supremacy of reality (God and the universe) which is its basis. In drinking to conscience, therefore, one is wise to drink also to our responsibility to keep the vision of our mind - that 'window' through which we look out on reality - always clean and clear, so that it never admits a distorted image of things (some people nowadays seem to have

closed the window altogether, and - shut up inside themselves - they imagine they actually see what in fact they are simply dreaming).

Newman, indeed, in defending the supremacy of conscience, he is very explicit as to *what sort* of conscience can be regarded as supreme, and as to *what must be our attitude* towards its supremacy: conscience understood 'not as a fancy or an opinion, but as a *dutiful obedience* to what claims to be a Divine voice speaking within us' (ibid.). Many of those who invoke Newman today, on this matter of the rights of conscience, fail to echo his emphasis on the *duties* of conscience, on the duties owed *towards* conscience.

In the first place, there are duties of conscience. Conscience has its duties, as well as its rights. It has the duty to search for truth, to look for genuine moral norms and standards which really point the way towards what is right and good. It has, in other words, the duty to seek out the authentic 'voice of God', the true moral laws that govern both the natural and the supernatural orders. This, for instance, means that in case of doubt, I cannot conscientiously act out of whim or just according to what most suits my convenience. I am bound, in conscience, to do all in my power to clear up my doubts before acting (by studying the case, by means of consultation, etc.). And, in general it is the duty of conscience to form itself properly (study, reflection, knowledge of the laws of God and the Church, etc.).

In the second place, there are duties *towards* conscience, essentially the duty to *obey* it. In his *Apologia*, Newman writes, 'I have always contended that obedience even to an erring conscience was the way to gain light' (Ch. IV). No doubt he felt he was speaking from

personal experience. And anyone familiar with his life knows how he suffered from his immensely sensitive obedience to his conscience, how he suffered as it brought him to the light.

Today, more than ever, it is necessary to say that the man who really listens to his conscience and is prepared to be faithful to it, will often have the sense *of obeying* a voice that leads him *in a direction a large part of him does not feel like following*. We are of course speaking of the man who takes his conscience seriously, who looks up to it and respects it and for this reason is prepared to acknowledge its supremacy and obey it.

Newman writes elsewhere that if we wish to find religious (or moral) truth, we must 'interrogate our hearts, and (since it is a personal individual matter) interrogate our *own* hearts, interrogate our own consciences, interrogate, I will say, the God who dwells there', and to do so 'with an earnest desire to know the truth and a sincere intention of following it' (cf. Ward, *Life*, II, 330).

Conscience is a precious but delicate guide. Its voice is easily distorted or obscured. To dictate to conscience is to silence and, eventually, to destroy it. Conscience must be listened to, and listened to sensitively. It needs to be interrogated, even to be cross-examined. And only those who habitually interrogate their conscience and are ready to pay heed even to its awkward answers, will not cheat their conscience or be cheated by it.' [3]

## **Conscience: our security system**

All sin turns us away from God and closes us in on ourselves. The self-centeredness of sin, therefore, is the

enemy not only of our eternal salvation, but also of our human development and happiness here on earth. To be overcome by sin is to be wounded, to suffer damage, in one's integrity and personality. We are in constant danger from this enemy, but nature has equipped us with a basic defense system, which is our conscience - our intimate sensitivity to good and evil.

The man who understands the importance and delicacy of conscience will be more concerned for its health than for the health of his body. A malformed or warped conscience is a diseased conscience. And a diseased conscience is the moral equivalent of a diseased nervous system. There are moments - moments when we come into contact with physical pain - when we all regret the sensitivity of our nerves. In such moments we may be tempted to regard our nervous system as a nuisance, and to wish we didn't have it, or that it didn't work. Yet, for normal living, the absence or failure of the nervous system could prove fatal. The man whose nerve endings do not function, who feels no pain and therefore withdraws from no pain, may not suffer as other men do. But he is in greater danger of going himself real harm, of burning or wounding or freezing his hand or arm beyond any possibility of recovery.

Similarly, when a man's conscience has gone, one may say that his essential security system--the built-in system of nature--has broken down. Morally he is defenseless, against selfishness and the whole process of human frustration. Humanly, without any sensitivity to right or wrong, he is a sub-man.

A man's conscience is healthy when his moral principles are right and in accordance with objective truth. When a man's moral principles are unsound or wrong, his

conscience is sick or diseased. When a man has no principles at all, his conscience is dead.

A healthy conscience is not an absolute safeguard against wrong-doing. A man with a healthy conscience may still sin, but he will be aware of it. His conscience will send out distress signals and he will notice them. It will keep calling for a change of course--for a change of heart or conduct and can bring him back to normal.

Even if the will has become quite infected and undermined by attachment to sin, as long as the mind remains healthy the will may, with God's help, be won back. But if the mind itself goes, if sin or error actually reaches the mind and infects it, falsifying its truth, warping its principles, darkening its light... our Lord's words, 'If the light that is in you is darkness' (Mt 6:24), are a warning against this possibility. A man's conscience can be darkened. This can happen without his fault. Or he can, culpably, darken his own conscience. In either case his conscience is like a maladjusted computer; it will misinterpret and mishandle the information fed into it and consistently offer, as correct, the wrong answers.

## **Conscience is personal and singular**

Conscience is one's *own* sense of the rightness or wrongness of things. Conscience, therefore, is *personal*. And it is *singular*. I can say, *my* conscience tells me this is right or that is wrong. I cannot really say *what other people's* consciences tell them, and less still can I be guided by the consciences of others.

Is there such a thing as a 'collective' conscience about moral matters? Perhaps; but it is a conscience that one can never properly examine. One can only adequately



examine one's own conscience. Of all the types of opinion polls, therefore, those about matters of conscience probably have least value. If it is difficult enough at times to know the sincerity of one's own conscience, it is quite impossible to check the sincerity of a supposed collective conscience. In any case, even if opinion reports or polls truly reflected what other people sincerely feel in their consciences, they can provide no sure guide for *me* in my actions, since I will be judged not by whether I followed the consciences of others, but by whether I followed my own conscience, i.e. by whether I listened to it sincerely, respected it and obeyed it. [4] In Newman's words, it is our *own* hearts, our *own* consciences, we must interrogate.

Moral responsibility cannot be collectivized. It remains personal and singular. To try to take refuge behind the presumed consciences of other people, pretending to oneself that in this way one's own individual responsibility is diluted, is to fool oneself and to introduce a fatal element of insincerity into one's own moral life.

## **Sincerity**

Sincerity: this too is undoubtedly a key factor in the formation of a sound conscience. But there is a strong tendency in all of us to deceive ourselves, and we would be wise not to take the sincerity of our conscience for granted. It can be achieved--but only if we are ready to submit our hearts to that constant interrogating of which Newman speaks.

As already pointed out, a man's conscience may be sincere and may yet be informed (malformed, deformed) by wrong principles. Nevertheless, the man who habitually questions himself (i.e. the man who, in a sense, habitually *tests* his own sincerity) will sooner or later gain

new light to correct his principles where they are mistaken. Newman again remains an outstanding example.

The greater importance our age attaches to conscience will always be beneficial provided we attach equal importance to *examination* of conscience. The traditional Christian practice of Examination of Conscience never mattered more than today. It is only logical to expect that it will be a more and more frequent theme of sermons, articles, discussion groups, etc.

To place oneself in the presence of an all-seeing God is the best safeguard against insincerity, against even the most veiled temptation to self-deception in the depths of one's heart or conscience. God, who knows our innermost thoughts and motives and who loves us, will not let us deceive ourselves = provided always that we seek him and listen to him. He will ensure that the light of our conscience is light indeed, and not darkness which we have mistaken for the light.

## NOTES

[1] The question of the rightness or wrongness of conscience should be clearly distinguished from that of good faith, of the sincerity of conscience. A man may be perfectly sincere in his conscience. He may believe that the principles he follows in his actions are sound and true principles of human conduct and development. He may be quite sincere in this belief; and he may be quite mistaken. If he is mistaken, despite his sincerity, the principles he follows in his actions may lead him on to a frustrated and unhappy human life. Just as a man may sincerely choose a road he believes leads to Birmingham. But if he is mistaken in his choice, if the road he is following does not actually go to Birmingham, his sincerity will not get him there. This is not

to say that sincerity is no safeguard to conscience. It is a safeguard-in the sense that the man who is truly and deeply sincere, and humble enough to acknowledge his need for guidance, will normally come to see where his principles have gone astray and be in a position to correct them. We will return to this point later.

[2] Cf. Ward, *Life II*, 404

[3] An episode in the Gospel (Mk 11: 27-33) shows the disastrous effect of insincerity. A group of priests and religious leaders of the Jews approach our Lord to interrogate him: 'What authority have you for acting like this? Or who gave you authority to do these things?' He is prepared to answer their interrogation, provided first they are prepared to be sincere and to interrogate themselves. He asks them first to tell him their opinion about John's baptism, whether it came from Heaven' (having divine approval), or simply 'from man' (and therefore commanding no special respect). But they do not give him their opinion, not their real opinion, not their opinion in conscience. They do not ask themselves what they really believe in their hearts to be the truth, to be right or wrong. They simply weigh up the consequences of different answers, trying to find one which might suit their convenience: 'If we say from heaven, he will say, "When why did you refuse to believe him?" But dare we say from man?' ('for', adds the Gospel, 'they had the people to fear, for everyone held that John was a real prophet').

Though religious leaders, they are not men of principle. They are 'practical' men, men of policy. As far as their own convenience goes, they reason intelligently. But they will go no further in their reasoning. They are men in whom convenience has taken the place of conscience.

In the Gospel event they find no convenient answer to our Lord's interrogation. And convenience-or rather inconvenience-pleads ignorance: 'We do not know'.

Our Lord's reaction to their insincerity is also significant: 'Nor will I tell you my authority for acting like this'. It is as if he were saying, 'If you are not prepared to be sincere, to look into your hearts and face the truth, then there is no use in our pretending to talk. I cannot communicate with you, nor you with me'. And so it is in practice. The person whose life is not ruled by sincerity, by readiness to face up to the truth or to the demands of conscience, however inconvenient or exacting, cuts himself off from divine communication. The man who is afraid to face his conscience is in effect afraid to face God, and only those who face God can be in touch with him.

[4] I will be judged according to my conscience in the sense that I will have to render account not only for the occasions when I went against my own personal moral convictions but also for the manoeuvres by which I managed to undermine my own objectivity, warping it to suit my passions or habitually turning a blind eye to compromising - but real - aspects of my conduct. A man may succeed in fashioning for himself a conscience to his own liking, but his protests of having been subsequently 'sincere' towards such a deformed conscience are not likely to stand up to God's judgment. Personal moral responsibility remains untransferable. As Msgr. Josemaria Escriva remarked: 'The advice of another Christian and especially a priest's advice, in questions of faith and morals, is a powerful help for knowing what God wants of us in our particular circumstances. Advice, however, does not eliminate personal responsibility. In the end, it is we ourselves, each one of us on our own, who have to decide for ourselves and

personally account to God for our decisions': J. Escriva, in *Conversations with Msgr. Escriva*, Scepter Press, p. 111.

## 03. CONSCIENCE AND AUTHORITY

### **The authority of the truth**

The relationship between conscience and authority is one of the most important and delicate of current questions. It cannot be separated from the relationship between conscience and truth.

The man who acknowledges that, though his mind is the only means by which he can come to the truth, the truth is greater than his mind, acknowledges the *authority* of the truth. The truth, so understood, clearly possesses absolute authority. It demands total submission on the part of the mind. The mind may find the truth hard to accept, it may wrestle with it, be tempted to resist it. But if it sees it as the truth, then it has no alternative - if it is to remain sincere - but to surrender to it, to accept it.

In this sense the truth teaches by its own authority, and the sincere mind cannot escape its sway. As Vatican II says, "The only way truth can impose itself is by the force of its own gentle but powerful influence on the mind of man." (*Declaration on Religious Liberty*, par. 1).

'Two plus two equals four' is an authoritative truth. It demands acceptance from my mind. A moment's reflection tells me that a truth such as this - 'two plus two equals four' - is not a product of my mind. Even if I didn't exist, it would still be true. It really is antecedent to my mind; it is *above* my mind. The mind is capable of rising to it, of seeing it. Once it does see it, once it becomes convinced of its truth, it accepts it. In fact, as we have said, it cannot refuse to accept the truth once it has seen it - not, at least, without losing its own sincerity and lying to itself.

One can say that the truth commands allegiance, has authority; that it has power over man's mind, that it rules from above... Or one can express this in a different way. One can say that man's mind is capable of *rising* to the truth, grasping it, *making it its own*... This is perhaps the more important, just as it is the more appealing, way of putting it. We will return to this point later.

## **Trusting only oneself?**

The surrender of the mind to the truth is not in any case a defeat. It is a victory. The mind that has been seeking the truth, and now at last discovers it, accepts it with an experience of relief and joy. One could illustrate this with the experience of the examinee who has been struggling with a mathematics problem, and suddenly sees the solution. He had been stuck, paralyzed. Now he sees the truth, he can go forward. How many people, who have been struggling with the problem of life have had similar experiences! They saw no explanations, no answers, or the answers they saw did not satisfy. They did not feel at peace with this or that solution; it did not fit all the points, it did not ring quite true. Now they have seen an answer that really seem to cover everything, that really seems true. They joyfully accept it.

There is a current impression - at the root of many disgruntled attitudes - that the mature man trusts only what he can verify for himself, and that to let oneself be guided by the word or authority of others is the mark of mental immaturity and betrays an insecure personality.

This of course is not necessarily true. If there is a clear sign of mental or emotional immaturity, it is precisely in the inability to distinguish between an authority or influence that can be trusted and one that cannot. The man

who doesn't know who or what he can trust in life is an isolated and unhappy person. This seems to be the sad lot of many people today.

## **Trust and maturity**

The mature personality accepts the advice or indications of others, *insofar as he has reason to trust them*. And if he has enough reason for trusting them, he follows their advice even in matters which are beyond his own powers of checking personally. In fact, it is precisely when he is not in a position to check for himself some matter he regards as important, that he will feel happiest to have and be able to follow the indications of some authority he can really trust. A man is glad to have a doctor or lawyer to consult, and readily follows their advice, in areas where he himself may be ignorant, because he trusts their professional competence and integrity.

The motorist who wants to get to Birmingham and consults a map, or asks an A.A. man, or follows a signpost, is trusting authority and is very glad to be able to do so. He regards it as no humiliation - unless he is a fool - to have to rely on maps and signs and guides to get to his destination. Indeed, if he has been a bit uncertain about his way or feeling somewhat lost, it is with a sense of relief - even of gratitude - that he reads the signpost he comes across or listens to the A.A. man who offers to advise him.

Most people will in fact trust the map or signpost more than their own unaided sense of direction. It is logical. The map or signpost, they feel, is based on greater knowledge than they possess. It is only reasonable to trust it more.



In accepting the truth (the authority) of the signpost, the traveller has no sense of something being *imposed* on him from the outside. His position is rather that of someone who has been offered a piece of information he didn't possess before, who has freely sized it up, freely accepted it, and freely acts upon it.

One feels that the difficulties of many Catholics regarding the authoritative guidance of the Church would disappear if only they could see their position in this light.

The authority of the Church, in her teaching on faith and morals, *is a service*. It is a signposting of the way to heaven. It is trustworthy, for it is divinely guaranteed. [1]. It is not forced on anyone. It is simply offered to men. And each one can, if he wishes, make it his own.

## **Making the truth one's own**

*He makes it his own* - this is the idea that needs to be emphasized. The Catholic undoubtedly puts his trust in the guidance of the Church (as does the traveller in the signposting of the local authority). But it is not really correct to say that he *surrenders* his mind to that guidance. What happens is rather the opposite. In accepting that guidance or teaching, he incorporates it, as a further point of knowledge, into his own grasp of the truth. It becomes part of the breadth and scope of his mind, an enlargement of his patrimony of truth, of the knowledge he possesses.

This is clear in purely human matters. Once you have grasped, for instance, the theorem of Pythagoras or the notion of Evolution, it *becomes* yours: part of your mind, a possession no one can take from you... You can only lose it by getting it wrong, by falling into error about it...

Yet you haven't invented this truth. This may be humbling to your pride (how the refusal to be so humbled has so often held up the progress of truth and science!). But though you haven't invented it, you have now found it. You haven't discovered it - and yet you have. You have not the merit of the original discoverer (and yet he too did no more than *discover* it, he did not create it). But you have the *enrichment* of discovery.

One does not really surrender one's mind to the truth. If there is any question of surrender, it is the truth that surrenders - that lets itself be caught by the human mind. Truth, after all, is the quarry of science. And all truly scientific research is based on the supposition, and sustained by the hope, that the truth can be caught.

And so with the revelation of Christ. The Catholic faith is not an obligation so much as a privilege: a new opportunity. It offers one the freedom to take up a system of thought that is divinely guaranteed, and *to make it one's own*.

## **Faith is a free thing**

No one would say that a local authority in putting up a signpost at a crossroads is in any way *imposing* on people or limiting their personal freedom. It is rather facilitating their choice in a way they appreciate. How absurd then is the suggestion - and, though absurd, it is often made - that in the Catholic Church there is no real freedom because Catholics are *forced* to submit to a set body of teaching. The Catholic Church indeed claims to teach the truth about the way to heaven. But no one is forced to believe in the teaching of the Church, or indeed forced to do anything in the Catholic Church. The Church is not a police state or a concentration camp or a prison. It is

a voluntary system. Faith is a free thing. The Church cannot make me believe. I believe because I want to. Because *I* choose to. [2].

Each one of us is free to believe what he wants, or, more accurately, to believe what his mind approves as credible. I have always felt that freedom and have freely wanted to believe the Catholic Church's teaching - because I have considered the evidence and have come to the conclusion that its teaching is guaranteed by our Lord and is true. Presumably all Catholics have done the same. I cannot imagine any other rational way of being a Catholic.

## **Authority serves freedom**

The authority of revelation - of Jesus Christ who, as he promised, is present with us still in the teaching of his Church - is something to be approached not with reluctance and constraint, but gladly and with gratitude. It is hard to understand why a person should complain at having a divine way opened and signposted before him. We would say it was a very old-fashioned and unintelligent motorist who objected to the opening of the M1. He is not forced to take the motorway. He can go to Birmingham by another route if he thinks it is better, or he can go somewhere else if he is not interested in getting to Birmingham. But the average man who does want to get to Birmingham is glad to have the motorway, and freely follows it. Yet all the time he travels he is trusting *authority*: that the signs are true and that the road really does lead to Birmingham.

Seen in this light, the authority of the Church, far from restricting man's freedom, *facilitates* the choice of personal conscience. It signposts the way, and so gives an assurance (that those who understand life as the problem of

getting to heaven, badly want) that one's choices place one on the right road.

Freedom of conscience is a precious thing - however often improperly understood. But freedom of conscience is not best exercised at unmarked crossroads. At an unmarked crossroads, the man who wishes to get somewhere - the man who thinks his choices really matter - wants a compass, a map, a guide. He wants information. He needs to inform his conscience. And that, in matters of salvation, is the marvellous function of the Church. The Church's authoritative teaching does not force conscience; it *informs* it. It provides conscience with vital information. It removes doubts. It gives certainty. In doing so it does not take away our personal freedom. It simply makes it easier for us to exercise it, if we wish, in choosing roads that are divinely guaranteed to lead to Heaven.

## NOTES

[1] Those who do not believe in the divine guarantee are not of course likely to regard it as trustworthy. But this is the whole crux of the matter.

[2] Two important points should be noted here:

(A) The more theologically-minded reader will remind me - quite rightly - that faith is not *just* one's own choice... Faith is first of all a grace; a free gift from God; TNo one can come to me unless my Father draws himU (Jn 6:44). The text above naturally presupposes this grace. Then, of course, it is *I* who choose to correspond - or not. It is I who freely accept or freely reject, this grace of faith. This is closely connected with a second point:

(B) Modern man does well to prize his personal freedom. But he should not forget (or be allowed to forget)

that freedom always carries with it certain *consequences*; that therefore one cannot reasonably act freely and at the same time ignore or think one can escape what are in fact *inescapable* consequences of one's own free actions. I am free to step out of a fifth-floor window, but, if I do, I am not free to escape the consequence of having my brains bashed out on the pavement.

The author of these essays would like to see Catholics in general more conscious of both the freedom and the reasonableness of the faith in the Church that being a Catholic implies. But insofar as there are some Catholics who choose to exercise the freedom (which, God help us, all of us possess) *not* to place their faith in the Church's teaching (or not to obey her discipline), then he would also wish to draw their attention to the inescapable consequences of such a free refusal to believe or obey.

And let us not be afraid of the word obedience. Faith means to put one's trust in the word of Christ, and therefore to be prepared to obey him. Faith implies obedience. Scripture speaks of the obedience of faith (cf. Acts 6:7; Heb 11:8); our Lord makes obedience the test and proof of love for him: "Whoever receives my commandments and obeys them, he it is who loves me" (Jn 14:21.) The Catholic whose faith makes him see Christ in the authority of the Church ["Anyone who listens to you listens to me" (Lk 10:16)], and therefore obeys that authority, *is conscious of obeying Christ*. And of course he is conscious of obeying *freely*; there lies the dignity and the merit of his obedience - it is freely given. The person who refuses to obey, who rejects the authority of the Church, *also rejects it freely*. He must weigh the responsibility of his free act of rejection. And he must certainly accept the main and inevitable consequence of this

free act emphasized by our Lord himself: "Anyone who rejects you rejects me; and anyone who rejects me, rejects him that sent me" (Lk ibid.).

In short, if one is free to reject the authority of the Church, one is not free to regard oneself as a Catholic or a faithful follower of Christ, after such a rejection.

## 04. FREEDOM

### **Is man free?**

Man has always talked about freedom; but never so much as today. If he talks about it more, presumably it is because he is more concerned about it. Is this because there is more freedom in the world? Or is it perhaps because there is less? [1]

On the one hand, it is very arguable that man's freedom, politically and economically, is *diminishing* (he is more under the power of the State and of state-controlled economic conditions; he is more subjected to taxes, more tied down by red-tape, etc.).

Nevertheless many people would maintain that personal freedom - freedom in personal conduct - is increasing, in both Western societies and in recent months in East European (formerly Marxist) societies. People are 'freer' to do what they like morally; e.g. where sex is concerned. It seems undeniable that people in general accept fewer restrictions in the area of sex than formerly. But it seems equally undeniable that this greater 'freedom' in conduct somehow doesn't seem to have produced greater happiness in life; and most people would agree that there is something unsatisfactory about a greater freedom that doesn't lead to greater happiness.

Others deny the idea of freedom altogether. Man is not free. He is really a conditioned being, and the pattern of his actions is determined by his hereditary traits and his circumstances. Man therefore is only fooling himself in talking about his freedom. Clearly the first thing one must do is to try to clarify this. [2] When we talk about freedom,

are we talking about a real thing, however difficult to define? Or are we talking about something imaginary?

## **Free: and not yet free**

Is man free? Or is he not free? I would be prepared to defend both propositions! - that man is free; and that he is not free... It all depends on what one understands by freedom. Because there is a certain ambiguity in the word. When one says man is free, if one means that *man has free will*, that he possesses a power of intelligent choice, I would defend that, as against all determinists. There may indeed be moments in which we feel our free will was lessened, or perhaps completely overwhelmed, by circumstances. No one will deny that this can really occur in certain cases. But no one, I imagine, will deny either that we can easily fool ourselves about such moments, and that when we say we were swept away by passion or temper or circumstances, what perhaps really happened is that with our free will we freely chose an easier course rather than a harder one. It is handy to be a determinist if one is not prepared to choose the harder options; if one is not prepared, for instance, to control one's sensuality, or to restrain one's tendency to criticise others, or to face up to one's responsibilities, or to check one's self-centered ambition.

So, in allowing that there may be cases in which one's free will is lessened or removed by circumstances, I would maintain that such cases, in normal persons, are few. The normal person has only to look back on the actions of any one of his days to be perfectly convinced that he could quite easily (or at least quite definitely) have varied many--most-of them: he could have not got up in the morning, or he could have got up on the dot; he could have written this letter first instead of that; he could have watched a different TV programme to the one he actually saw; he



could have had a row with his wife instead of having avoided it--or he could have avoided a row instead of having had it.

In other words, the normal person has only to reflect a little to be quite convinced that each day he has exercised a power to choose in certain directions and that he could have exercised that same power in other directions. And that is to be convinced *that one has free will*.

But free will - the power to choose - is not yet the same as freedom. I can choose this or that: fried eggs or boiled eggs, for instance - if I am given the choice. If I am only offered boiled eggs, I am free to eat or to go hungry, which is not so much of a free choice. No; free will and freedom are not synonymous. With my free will I may choose to go to New York; yet I may not have the cash to do it. Therefore, I am not free to do it. The slave has free will. But he has not freedom. So freedom is not just having free will. It is something more. And I would maintain that we do not yet possess that something more, that we do not yet possess freedom in all its fullness.

## **Is freedom independence?**

If freedom is not just having free will, what is it? Is it *independence*? Some people appear to think that freedom essentially means independence. And when they say that man is free or ought to be free, they are implying that he is independent or is *meant to be independent*.

Now this is something that I would absolutely deny. It seems quite evident to me that man is not independent. He is in fact an extremely dependent creature. One of the obviously false things often said in remarks about freedom

is that 'man is born free'. Born free? Can you imagine anything more helpless and dependent than a new-born baby? No; man is born with evident dependences. At the start of his life his dependences are quite involuntary, almost unconscious: air, light, warmth, food... As he grows up he begins to choose things, and very often creates new and *voluntary* dependences or needs. He depends on a train or a car to get around, on smoking to calm his nerves, on aftershave lotion to stop his cheeks itching, on popularity to boost his ego, on newspapers for his views, on a wife and family for affection and so on.

To think, as many people do, that true human development means reaching a state of total self-sufficiency, is false, for total self-sufficiency is just not possible for man. In the truest sense, the more you live, the more dependent - and therefore the less self-sufficient - you become. You become more dependent on few things, or on many things, on important things or unimportant things, on things that make you more of a man or less of a man, things that make you *more free or less free*... The quality of your life is really determined in fact by the type of things you are dependent on. And we are approaching the real problem of freedom when we say it is the problem of the type of *dependences* one acquires in one's life. The man who is dependent on drink or drugs or lust is scarcely free. To crave for sex and to center one's life on it can be the most abject slavery.

But man, precisely because he is not self-sufficient, must want something. And freedom really has very much to do with wanting and depending on things that raise a man up, develop him, ennoble him. So, to want and long for truth or goodness or love is part of the process of becoming free. Gustave Thibon speaks of a 'dead dependence, which oppresses a man, and a living dependence which opens him

out and elevates him.' And he adds: 'The first of these dependences is slavery; the second, freedom.'

## Defining freedom

So far, I have deliberately avoided the difficult problem of defining freedom. But perhaps now we can attempt to say what it is. Most people, if pushed, would probably say that freedom is the 'power to do what you like'. This is a superficial idea of freedom that just won't stand the test. You can do many things you feel like doing, and be less free as a result; for instance, to use the simple example given by Frank Sheed, you can eat as much as you feel like and the result is that limitation of your freedom we call indigestion.

No; freedom is not the power to do what you like. It is something much more important. It is *the power to be fully oneself*, the power to *become* fully oneself, to *realize fully one's potentialities as a human being*.

Man is not born free. But man is born with the power to become free, to become master of his own actions. More paradoxically still, one can say man is born with the *power to become a man*... A lion cub just naturally grows into a fully developed lion; it doesn't have to worry about it. But a child doesn't automatically or inevitably become a man. You don't become a man just by reaching the age of 21 or 33.

You may never become a man. Some people don't. A man is not someone who is well developed physically. His physical powers develop automatically. But he also has spiritual powers, and these may not develop, or may develop insufficiently. They may remain underdeveloped. You meet fully grown men, who have underdeveloped

minds, and especially have underdeveloped wills; they have little or no will-power. They are not yet men. They are not yet masters of their own selves or their own choices. They are not yet free. Therefore, they don't yet properly possess what most distinguishes human nature; and they may end up by losing it completely.

The person who normally acts according to what he feels like doing is likely to be very underdeveloped as regards freedom. He is not really in possession of it. He is largely moved by comfort or instinct or passion - which is to be moved very much like the animals.

So, I insist, freedom is the power to realize one's potentialities, the power to develop, to grow, to become oneself, not to be forced to drift into something else, not to be forced to be less than a man.

This is the paradox. This is why we are free and yet not free - not yet. We are free because we have free will. But we are not yet fully free - because not all of our possibilities or even our wants have been fulfilled. Most people would readily agree that as long as one has unsatisfied desires or wants, one is not fully free. At one stage in World War II the Allied war aims were expressed in a declaration of Four Freedoms. I forget three of them, but one, I think was Freedom from Want. This properly understood, is real freedom. Not just freedom from hunger or from material want. This is essential, but it is not enough. To be a beggar and suddenly to inherit a million pounds doesn't bring freedom from want. Such a person will still want more: more love, fame, pleasure, companionship, even more money. Real freedom from want is to have come to a state where one *wants nothing further*, not by reduction to Nirvana, where one is satisfied because there is no desire left, but by the full satisfaction of the true needs

of human nature. What these true needs are each one has to work out for himself; he has to decide, for instance, whether love is a truer need than sex, or whether a man can be happy and free if he leaves unsatisfied his immense need of goodness and truth and beauty...

If freedom is the power to be fully oneself, it is obviously a power in motion. It looks forward to a state where at last, we hope, we will be truly ourselves, where we will have fulfilled all the potentialities of our nature and possess ourselves fully. Now clearly we do not yet possess that state. When we speak of freedom in this sense we are speaking of some *future freedom* - of the ultimate goal of our life towards which we try to tend and away from which we try not to drift.

## **Choices matter**

But let us look more closely at that *present* freedom which is our free will, our power to choose between different alternatives, our power to say Yes or No. This is the freedom that characterises man and forms the basis of his dignity and makes him someone who can carry personal responsibility. He is free and responsible *because he can choose*. What makes imprisonment such an indignity is that it deprives a man of so many choices. His freedom of choice is brutally narrowed. He can walk the prison yard, but not the city streets outside or the countryside. He can eat the food offered him or go hungry. He cannot go out and buy a 'Big Mac'. From this it is very evident that the extent to which a man has no real choice, he is not free. He is only free when he can choose this or that, when he can say Yes - or No. If he can only say Yes, he is not free. We will return to this point.

Another point is that some of our free choices develop us more, some develop us less, while others hinder our development. We are not static personalities. We are changing all the time - whether we want it or not, or like it or not. In part, circumstances *force* us to change. But what basically affects our changing personalities is our own free *choices* - whether we say Yes when we could have said No, whether we say No when we could have said Yes. We are like men constantly on the road, coming to crossroads all the time (every choice means a crossroads) - and *choosing*. Very clearly, therefore, it is important to know what sort of things one chooses, and how they affect one's own development as a person, as a personality. Because choices, like roads, are not indifferent. They tend to lead you somewhere - uphill or down, to your goal (if you have one) or away from it. They may lead nowhere; they may be dead ends, tracks that sink into a swamp or run out in the sands of a desert.

## **Underdeveloped people**

If we look back at any stage in our life - say over the last four or five years - if we look back at our own personal history, we see that we have chosen certain things, and we are conscious that we could have chosen different things: and that we would be different persons today if we had chosen differently. My own personal history could have been so different: for better or for worse. If, with hindsight, we could relive those years again, I imagine most of us would vary some of our choices. Because we see they were poor choices, they didn't help us; and we feel that some other alternative would probably have been better. Of course, we can't change the past. But we can try to learn from past experience, so as to judge our *future* choices better.

We hear a lot today about underdeveloped countries. Generally, one is speaking of countries that are making great efforts to develop, and perhaps are showing more signs of life and vitality than many 'developed' countries. But what a great lot of underdeveloped *people* there are around: people whose lives move in very narrow circles, whose horizons are limited to small personal interests and satisfactions, bored at work and bored at home; living for their golf or bingo or telly...; and who are making practically no efforts to *develop*.

## **Free and easy choices**

How do people get into such a state of apathy? Generally by their own free choices: by their free and easy choices; by systematically choosing the easy options, the more attractive or smoother road, at every crossroads that comes up. And the result of using one's freedom that way is, at best, a rut; perhaps a dead end; at worst, it is a desert or a precipice. A rut is simply a conditioned way of choosing, an unfree way of choosing. Sometimes a person gets into such a rut *without being aware of it*. He always says Yes to the same things and never thinks of the fact that he is not really living as a free man--making deliberate choices--but simply drifting. Sometimes a person *is* aware of the rut, or becomes aware of it. Then he would like to get out of it. But he finds perhaps that it is not that easy. The habit has taken hold of him and he can't break it. If he really can't, then he is not free. The person who can't help sliding into an armchair whenever he sees a television set switched on... or the person who realizes that he is smoking too much and wants to quit altogether, but who can't, has, at least in relation to these matters, lost his freedom. He can no longer say No. And to be free it is essential to be able to say Yes or No. *To be free it is essential to have at*

*least two choices.* If you have only one choice, if you can only say Yes, you're not free. (One choice is of course not really a choice at all. When, in fact, a person finds himself with only one choice, he says afterwards, 'I had *no* choice'. He is right.)

## **Freedom and sex**

I feel that a note of urgency could well enter here into our consideration of freedom. We are free, free to choose, and we are constantly exercising this freedom of choice, choosing roads that take us somewhere. *Where?* A man is completely at sea about his own life unless he can say where it is leading him. He is not really in charge of his life unless he has set himself a goal, and is using his choices - his free will - to attain that goal.

It is only if you have a goal in life, a goal of personal development, that you can use your free will intelligently. You can use it intelligently in a *positive* exercise: to choose things that help your development, that can enrich your personality and your life. And you can use it intelligently in a *negative* exercise--to avoid those choices which can limit your development, to avoid choosing things which keep you small and underdeveloped, which set you in a rut; and, much more important and urgent, to avoid those choices that are really dead ends--or worse: to avoid choosing things which are capable of enslaving you more and more, and perhaps of finally destroying you.

Take an obvious heading: 'Sex and Freedom'. Take the person who practises some form of restraint in sex, who chooses to observe the restrictions of a traditional morality, who believes therefore that sex is for marriage, and who believes that sexual thoughts should be controlled, and that



certain types of books and films or shows are to be avoided. Is he less free than, say, the man who follows his every instinct, who acknowledges no restraints, who does what he likes?

## **Restrictions and freedom**

Is a person less free because he accepts restrictions? Do all restrictions imply a loss of freedom? Yes? Reflect well on it... No! I would not agree that all restrictions necessarily involve a loss of freedom. Certain restrictions are in fact a safeguard of freedom. A man may accept them because he is personally convinced that they help to keep him free; and convinced that if he doesn't observe them, he can lose his freedom.

The cabin of an airliner is definitely a restricted area, normally in fact a rather cramped one. Yet the man who wants to get to New York, has the cash, buys a ticket, and enters the cabin, is not likely to step out of it in mid-flight in order to assert his freedom! The freedom that interests him is to get to New York, and the restrictions of the cabin (air-pressurised and heated, when outside there is scarcely any oxygen and the temperature is -45C; and travelling at 600 miles per hour) help him to exercise his freedom to the maximum advantage.

A road is a restriction. It has a certain paved width; it has curves and cambers. But the man who suddenly decides he will no longer be a slave to these restrictions and who, instead of following the next curve, drives straight on, will probably find that this assertion of his freedom leaves him at the bottom of the ditch or wrapped around the nearest tree. A motorway illustrates the point even more clearly than a normal road. It has more restrictions; it is fenced in, has limited entrance and exit points, maximum,

and sometimes minimum, speed... Yet no man in his right senses, when he chooses to travel by motorway, thinks of these restrictions as limiting his freedom, but rather as helping him to make better use of it.

If a man loves a woman, if a boy loves a girl, he wants to love her truly (to love her *purely*, if one may be old fashioned but clear), he wants to be *free* to love her. And if he is normal and sincere, he knows that his sexual nature--which can be directed towards serving and expressing his love--*has* to be *directed* towards that end. It has to be controlled, so as to be subordinated to his love. And that is something it doesn't easily accept. It tends to accept no control. It wants its own satisfactions on its own terms. And if it is left unrestrained, it takes over, it destroys love and enslaves.

## **'I chose slavery'**

Those who acknowledge no restraints in the matter of sex, are in danger of losing their freedom to love, of losing their freedom altogether. By saying Yes to such an imperious instinct as sex, as often as it makes itself felt, they are losing their ability to say No. And--the point needs to be repeated--a man is not free *unless he can also say No*. 'I can resist anything except temptation', quipped Oscar Wilde. He wasn't free. He was a slave (though at least he realized it). And there are many people around today who are deliberately and quickly forging their own slavery (even though--perhaps--many of them do not realize it).

*I Chose Freedom* was the title of a famous book some 30 years ago. Someone, I forget who, objected to the title; that it didn't make sense, that you can't choose *freedom*. Oh, but you can. And you can choose the

opposite of freedom. I fear that the autobiography of many people today may sadly have to be entitled *I Chose Slavery*.

A person's choice in doing this, in seeing or reading that, may indeed be a free choice; there lies its responsibility. But, in so many cases, it is by no stretch of the imagination a choice for freedom. It is a choice for slavery.[2]

Freely to choose slavery!... This may sound absurd. And in a sense, yes, it *is crazy* and irrational. But no more absurd or impossible than the case of the people, in one country or another, who freely and democratically vote themselves into a Communist regime. They have freely chosen slavery.

I feel there are lots of people today who talk loudly about their freedom, and who are in fact riding a runaway car, hurtling down a road which ends in a precipice; and they just don't know how to stop. So perhaps they boost their own morale by pretending they have made a breakthrough into a new dimension of freedom. And they haven't. They have simply and sadly lost control over their own lives. Their choices are becoming more and more determined and predictable. They are heading for total destruction or total captivity.

## NOTES

[1] "Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance" (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 4).

[2] The author feels bound, in justice and gratitude, to say that most and probably all of his ideas about freedom have been inspired by the words and writings of Msgr. Josemaria

Escriva de Balaguer, and he recommends the works of Msgr. Escriva to all those who want to understand what freedom - and especially the greatest freedom of all: Christian freedom - really means.

[3] In this sense we can say that while to sin is a sign of the existence of freedom in the will, it is not a genuine expression or assertion of freedom, but rather a cause of its weakening and decline (just as the fall into error is a sign that the mind is made to know, but to err is not an act of true knowledge, but just the opposite).

## 05. CRISIS OF FREEDOM

### **Free for what?**

A large part of the present-day confusion about freedom is because we think of freedom as being free from external restrictions; and we forget that it is much more a matter of being free from internal restraints, from self-imposed or self-sought restrictions which hinder our development as true personalities. It is a matter essentially of having, and being able to exercise, an internal and personal power, a power which includes self-dominion, self-possession and self-realisation in intimate relationship.

'Free a man', the Civil Rights leader, James Farmer, has said, 'and he is not yet free. He must still free himself.' And Nietzsche wrote: 'You call yourself free? I would hear of your master-thought, not of your escape from the yoke. Are you a man that should escape from the yoke? Many have cast off all their values when they cast off their servitude. Free from what? How does that concern Zarathustra? Let your eye answer me frankly: Free *for* what?...'

Modern man wants to be free *from*. But he doesn't know what he should be free *for*. And as a result he is in danger of losing or abandoning his freedom, even if simply because he is less and less capable of seeing any really worth-while use to which it can be put.

### **Stuck at the crossroads**

In the end freedom is of little use to the man without values or ideals, just as it is of less use still to the man who is afraid to commit himself. And it so happens that

modern man is both very unsure of his ideals and very suspicious of almost any real commitment.

Freedom is of little use to the man lacking in values or ideals, for if he has no worth-while goals to his life then his choices can mean little to him; fundamentally his problem is that he *cannot respect the things he chooses*. Even if it were true that there is more freedom in the world today, of what use can this be to a world with a lessened sense of values? It is sad to boast of at last having all the roads open and unrestricted before one, if at the same time one has a growing feeling that none of them seem to lead anywhere...

And what is the point of having all the roads open before one, if, deep down, one is afraid to choose any of them, or afraid at least to make more than tentative and very temporary choices; ready to take a few steps along one road, but even readier to retrace those steps as soon as one gets bored with it or finds the going tough; and then to try another road (another job, another cause, another husband, another wife...), and another, and another?

Man today is so suspicious of committing himself that he is in danger of voluntarily paralysing his power of choice, his own very freedom. For every choice is a commitment. And those who are afraid to choose, or exercise tentative choices and quickly revoke them, contradict and annul their own freedom. Modern man, like the men of all ages, stands at the crossroads of choice. But since modern man is afraid to commit himself, he remains at the crossroads.

## **Progressive paralysis**

This progressive paralysis of freedom, this growing inability to make a real and lasting choice of anything that demands 'sticking power'... this is not just the ordinary difficulty inherent in the power to choose, the difficulty which derives from the simple fact that the choice of any alternative *involves the exclusion of all other alternatives*. [1] This has always been true, and that is why any thinking man has always hesitated before a serious choice, before marrying, for instance. In choosing this woman, I am excluding all the rest; in committing myself to one girl, I renounce all the ever so many million other girls. There is an evident risk in this; and so there should be. Freedom has always been a risk for man. But in the past most men have, sooner or later, preferred to accept the risk. In the case given, they have preferred to put the question - with the idea, moreover, that it meant a life-long commitment! As it used to be put popularly, they preferred to 'take the plunge' rather than risk remaining 'high and dry'.

This is changing today. That a man is no longer prepared to buy a washing machine or a car without a twelve-month warranty may be no more than a sign of reasonable caution. But that more and more men are not prepared to enter into marriage without a proviso - perhaps a very implicit or even unconscious, but a real proviso - for the possibility of divorce, is a sign of a deep-rooted mistrust and a fear of commitment, which is ultimately a fear of love.

It is true that the advertiser-dominated world we live in does not encourage trust. We are told so much about the incredible qualities and extraordinary good value of practically everything that we end up believing in the *real* value of practically nothing.

But if we can perhaps blame the advertisers for our mistrust of the quality of so many man-made goods, we have only ourselves to blame if we mistrust such God-given goods as social relationships, friendship, love or marriage. We have abused so many of the good things God has given us that they no longer work in our service. We no longer trust them because we have deformed them and made them what they were never meant to be.

## **Commitment and love**

It is clear that if a man is not free (does not possess himself), he cannot love (which is to give oneself). But it should also be clear that if he does not love, he cannot ever truly be free. Freedom is really meant for love, and freedom, without love, makes little sense and is practically worthless.

To choose things that one cannot love, or that one cannot at least respect, is to choose a life without values; it is to degrade one's human nature. Pushed to the limit, it is hell, for hell is a state where one only chooses what one hates. The will that can only choose what it hates is not a *free* will; it is absolutely enslaved. So, every choice that is made without love is, at best, a poor exercise of freedom - so poor an exercise that, at the worst, it can be a step towards a total loss of freedom.

One has to love - and to love something worth loving - so as to be really free. Then one will freely commit oneself, and all of one's commitments will be commitments of love, for the essential need of love is *to commit itself to the loved one*.

There is a necessary interconnection between freedom, commitment (choice) and love. As Msgr.



Josemaria Escriva puts it: 'Any opposition felt between freedom and commitment is a sure sign that love is weak for *freedom resides in love*. For that very reason I cannot conceive freedom without commitment, or commitment without freedom; one reality underlines and affirms the other.' [2]

## **Doing what you like...**

Earlier on we rejected the idea that freedom is 'the power to do what one likes'. As we pointed out, this is an idea that won't stand examination. If it has nevertheless always enjoyed popularity as a notion of freedom, this must be put down either to superficial thinking, or else to a desire to propagate a libertine idea of freedom, to bestow the noble name of liberty on what is simply uncontrolled impulse. And it is clear, from what we said earlier, that when a man is not in control of his impulses - when he is controlled by them - he is not free, and the end of such runaway selfishness can only be the submergence of self in total slavery.

It is interesting to recall St Augustine's dictum: 'Love and do what you like' (*Ama et fac quod vis*), which in other times, when libertines were more cultured, if not more sincere, was a popular classical quotation among them. 'Love and do what you like'... Yet it wasn't in his libertine period, but after it - after he had fully experienced how freedom without real love can enslave - that St Augustine formulated this striking phrase. A little reflection makes his meaning clear. The love --the liberating love--he refers to is the love of God. The person who tries to make love for God the motive of all his actions, wants what God wants, he *likes* what God wants. Therefore, since it is always possible to do what God wants, he can always do what he likes, and will be the freest of men. Freedom, for

him, is indeed the power to do what he likes; and, as long as he keeps on loving, he will always be doing what he likes.

We might add, incidentally, that the person who tries to live this way has solved one of the major problems of morality: that of *liking what one ought to do*. He will do what he ought, what God wants of him (or at least he will try to do it), because he wants to do it, because he likes to do it.

## **Roads to freedom**

Freedom, as we said earlier, is the power to be fully oneself. There is the goal: to *become* what one has the potentiality to be. That is why many roads freely chosen are not roads to freedom. They are roads that prevent man from becoming fully a man. They are roads of self-limitation, self-frustration, or self-destruction. A man is limiting himself or destroying himself if he chooses the road of pride or lust or self-pity or insincerity or meanness.

The road to freedom is an uphill road, and the difficult steps by which a man follows it are truth, justice, service, humility, chastity, love... The more a man fights his way uphill along this road, the freer he becomes. And the freer he becomes, the more he possesses himself, the more he exercises full possession and control over all his faculties. His is the freedom of having one's lower faculties or instincts properly and dynamically subordinated to one's higher faculties--lust to love, anger to justice, for instance--and of having one's higher faculties joyously related to higher values: love to goodness, knowledge to truth. It is along this uphill road that a man must struggle if he wants to find freedom.

And yet two facts seem to make his quest vain. The first is the fact of death. No matter how free a man may become, no matter how much he possesses himself in the realisation of his possibilities, if death ends all, he loses all in death.

The second fact is that full self-realisation seems a necessarily impossible goal for man, that he is destined to the frustration of never being able fully to realize himself or fully to satisfy all his wants; destined therefore never to be fully free. After all, if, as we indicated earlier on, freedom particularly implies freedom from want, it seems clear that man is destined never to be fully free in this world, for no matter how much he possesses he will always want *more*. And the man who is conscious of some unsatisfied desire does not feel fully free.

Man's desire for pleasure or for goods can perhaps be fully sated. Yet the fact that man can actually come to a point of feeling disgust at pleasure or boredom with consumer goods, is a sure sign that his self-fulfilment does not lie along the path of these desires. However, there are two needs of man--precisely his greatest and noblest needs --that can never, in human experience, be fully satisfied.

These are man's need for truth and his need for goodness, his need to know and his need to love. These are man's greatest needs. They are needs that may be dulled or deadened. But it has remained a constant of human history that, if they are kept keen and alive, nothing, on earth, can fully satisfy them.

## **Man wants God**

Man wants to know *all* truth; he wants to know truth without limit. And he wants to find and possess goodness, and still more goodness, and still more. He wants eternal and infinite goodness, and eternal and infinite love. In other words, *he wants God*. This is why, even on the natural plane, it is clear that *man is made for God, and nothing less than God can satisfy him*. Only in the possession and enjoyment of God can man be truly himself and truly free.

Those who do not believe in God can seek perfect freedom, but they will not find it. If they feel themselves called to be Messiahs, they can promise full freedom to others, but they cannot give it. God is the only Messiah who can do that.

## **Salvation and self**

One finds one's self, or one loses one's self, in finding - or losing - God. And the finding or the losing of one's self is what, on the natural level, is implied in the terms salvation or perdition. Salvation, on the natural plane, means to save one's *self*, to achieve real *selfhood*, to possess one's self fully, in full and free exercise of all one's powers and faculties.

And perdition or damnation is to *lose* one's real self, to end up as a being without any unity or consistency or direction, a personality (if it can still be called that) that is no more than a battlefield between conflicting forces and desires, a being that has been reduced to torn and scattered remnants of bitterness and frustration and hatred and pride.

The difference between salvation and perdition is really the ultimate difference between freedom and slavery.

The process of becoming free (of gradually conquering one's freedom), or the process of losing one's freedom (of gradually degenerating into a slave), is a process that is worked out here on earth, during the lifetime of each individual. But the final result of this process, the *state* of final freedom or of final slavery, is lived forever in eternity.

We can never therefore possess full freedom here on earth. All we can achieve here are 'freedoms', possibilities and capacities to act freely and move and realize ourselves: the freedom to fight one's way forward, to battle and over-come self-centeredness, to learn to love. We have to fight constantly to exercise these freedoms, we have to fight even to maintain them, since they are freedoms that are in constant danger and can be lost.

For we can also fall into slavery here on earth; into one or many slaveries: the slavery of a proud self-centeredness, the slavery of a resentful or envious spirit, the slavery of lust, or of drink, or of drugs. And yet, while we are still travellers on this earth, these slaveries are not yet final, and can be shaken off or at least fought and prevented from getting more than a slippery and troublesome - but ineffectual - hold on us.

It is only when our journey has reached its end, when death has cut short for ever the struggle (or the lack of struggle) and terminated the process of development (or of degeneration), it is then that man 'sets' in his definitive and eternal self, in the glorious and joyous expansion of his freed self, or in the enslaved remnants of his lost self.

## **The gift of God's freedom**

Two further things must be mentioned. Man cannot save himself on his own. Only with God's help can he find

salvation. If he neglects or refuses God's help, he will lose himself. Man has always hoped for perfect freedom--to be fully master of his own nature, in full possession of all his faculties, and to be able to exercise all of them without restraint. But only God can give man this freedom.

The Christian, however, does not stop there, in this question of freedom. For God, who loves man, has not stopped there. God's plan, in Christ, is to give man infinitely more than he could have ever hoped for. It is to give him not only the full possession and enjoyment of his own human nature, with all the freedom this implies. It is to give him the possession and enjoyment of the *divine nature*. It is to *put him in possession of God's own freedom*.

So God's plan is that man, in the end, should not just find and possess himself. It is that he should find much more than himself, that he should possess infinitely more than himself. Only the Christian realizes what the fulfilment of man's potentialities can mean in the plan which God has revealed in Jesus Christ. For God has made man *capable* of God. He has made man capable of knowing and loving God - infinite Truth and Goodness - not only in a natural fashion, as a rational creature, in his natural fulfilment, might come to know and love God, *but in a supernatural fashion*. He has made man capable of knowing and loving God as God knows and loves himself; capable, that is, of living divine life and divine freedom.

This freedom is of course a free gift - a grace - of God. Grace, for the Christian, means just this: the gift which God bestows on man to enable him to live divine life and become an heir to divine freedom.

Freedom then, for the Christian, is something quite unique. It is the freedom which Christ himself has won for

us (cf. Gal 4:30). The Christian vision of freedom is of a totally different order to any mere human dream of freedom. What the Christian looks forward to is, in St Paul's ecstatic words, the *glorious freedom of the sons of God* (cf. Rom 8: 21). And that freedom, as God's very own, is both eternal and infinite.

## NOTES

[1] Mgr Escriva puts the point with typical clarity, and adds a thought that those who are afraid of a Christian commitment would do well to ponder. 'The choice of one thing; means that many other things which are also worthwhile, are excluded. This, however, does not imply a lack of freedom; it is simply a necessary consequence of our limited nature, which cannot embrace everything. Nevertheless, if, in each moment, one chooses God - who is the ultimate end also of the natural order - *in him one somehow possesses everything* (Italics mine).

[2] Italics mine. Cf. Chesterton's remark in *Orthodoxy*: 'I could never conceive or tolerate any Utopia which did not leave to me the liberty for which I chiefly care, the liberty to bind myself.'

## 06. FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE WITHIN THE CHURCH

### **The Church - the home of freedom?**

To the Christians of the first centuries, the Church, which was to them undeniably a source of authority, was also the home of freedom. And the pagan world was attracted to Christianity by the atmosphere of freedom which reigned within it and by the promise of freedom it offered.

How is it that today, in a world no less eager to be free, the last place most pagans would look to, as 'the home of freedom', is the Catholic Church? And how is it - sadder still! - that so many Catholics seem to find more constraint than freedom in their life in the Church?

To the pagan world of today, the Catholic Church - despite recent changes and reforms - remains an institution based on authority, and since authority and personal freedom are considered to be in irreconcilable opposition, current tensions in the Church are regarded as logical in a system where individual conscience and personal freedom are being constantly required to submit to authority.

Far from being able to answer or satisfy the suspicions or criticisms of non-Catholics, we ourselves are often those most swayed by them. Let us consider some of the most basic criticisms in more detail.

### **Objections**

In the Catholic Church, it is said, one is forced to submit to a set body of teaching - which is a direct limitation of freedom of choice.



In consequence, so the criticism continues, some Catholics find themselves in the intolerable position of being told one thing by their conscience and yet having to submit to the contrary because it is insisted upon by Church authority; and this is a much more serious violation of conscience...

Now the first of these criticisms is nonsense. The second is partly nonsense, and partly based on a misapprehension.

## **The Church is a free system**

As to the first, one has to repeat the point (obvious though it should be) made above, that no one is forced to do anything in the Catholic Church. The Church is not a concentration camp. It is not a police state. *It is a free system.* No one is obliged to be a Catholic or to believe what the Church teaches. No one can force me to be a Catholic, any more than they can force me to belong to the Conservative or Labor Parties. I am a Tory or a Socialist or a Liberal - or a Catholic or a Protestant or a Moslem - because *I* choose, because *I* personally have been convinced by the particular principles in question. And if I am no longer convinced of their truth or validity, *I* drop them. *I* choose to be a Catholic, or *I* choose not to be a Catholic. No one forces me. Nothing could be freer.

## **Conscience in conflict with conflict authority...**

But how about the situation of the Catholic whose conscience tells him one thing, while the Church's authority calls on him to accept something different? Is he not thereby being asked to steam-roll his conscience, to surrender his personality and freedom, and to live in a position of basic insincerity with himself? And is this not

happening all the time in the Catholic Church? Are Catholics - especially as they grow in maturity and awareness - not being faced more and more with such conflicts of conscience?

No one will deny that conflicts between conscience and authority occur in the Church. Yet I would suggest that *real* conflicts occur much less than might be imagined, that the sense of conflict which many Catholics seem to have today really derives not from greater awareness but precisely from a lack of true *self-awareness*, from a superficial understanding of what it means to be a Catholic, from a failure to grasp the freedom and self-determination of their own Catholic position.

Let us consider the case where a real conflict between authority and conscience occurs; in other words, the case where authority (e.g. the teaching of Pope or Council) is ranged on one side, saying that a particular way of acting is seriously wrong and to be avoided, while the individual's conscience - the 'whole' of his conscience, i.e. the *whole of his personal principles and convictions* - stands solidly in opposition, saying that the same way of acting is right and to be followed. In such a case, of course, he would follow his conscience. He *should* follow his conscience, in fact, according to the traditional principles of Catholic morality. [1]

## **Rejecting the Church**

Naturally, the matter would not stop there. In solving this conflict of conscience so he would have fundamentally altered his position as a Catholic; he would have largely emptied it of its basic meaning, and almost certainly rendered it sooner or later untenable. The point (whether he sees it or not) is that, in resolving his problem

of conscience in this way, *he is rejecting the Church*. He is rejecting the Church in effect, in its essence, even if he says he has no intention of leaving it. He is rejecting the *meaning* of the Church even if he claims he is not rejecting membership within it. The conclusion he has come to - which is really that in an important matter of its teaching the Church has not after all been upheld by Christ - is precisely to reject the Catholic concept of the Church and its Magisterium. The Catholic concept of the Magisterium - a teaching body guaranteed by God (cf. Lk 10:16) - has collapsed in his mind. [2]

The man whose conscience can no longer tolerate a Catholic concept of the Church, may still in fact continue to live the practices of a Catholic; he may still frequent the Sacraments, for instance. But the heart will have gone out of his religion. His religious life can no longer have the dimension of joy it gives to know that one cannot be deceived about the Christian way of life on earth, about the road to Heaven... In actual practice, the whole of his encounter with Christ will become uncertain, for if Christ is not present in the living voice and teaching of the Church, there is no guarantee of his presence in the Sacraments, in the Eucharist, in the Mass... If a man concludes that Christ does not uphold the Church's teaching on birth-control, then he has no reason to put faith in her teaching about divorce or euthanasia or abortion or pre-marital sex. All these become open questions, as far as he is concerned, crossroads of choice without any signposts, where one man's preference is no more likely to be right than another's.

There is no such thing any longer as a true Christian criterion in his mind. There is just human opinion, no more. He has not only lost grip on the rock of Christian truth, he has lost sight of it.

## What it means to be a Catholic

Many today would argue that one is entitled on grounds of conscience and in some fundamental matter, to choose a viewpoint contrary to that taught by the Church. Perhaps; but what one is not entitled to do, after such a choice, is to insist on regarding one's new position as a Catholic position. Such insistence is not to demand freedom; or if it is, it is to demand the freedom to empty terms and positions of any real meaning.

To claim the right both to be called Catholic and to be totally subjective about what being a Catholic means, is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It is a phenomenon that may not be due to insincerity, but then it must be put down to a lack of thought, to a failure to understand that to be a Catholic means to belong - voluntarily - to a Body that, where fundamental principles are concerned, thinks and teaches with the mind of Christ.

## Self-induced conflicts

Now I know that there are Catholics who feel that in certain cases their conscience tells them one thing, and the Church tells them another. In their dilemma, they follow the Church - but reluctantly, with a sense of coercion...

My comment is that this sensation of conflict - between conscience and authority - is *self-induced*. It derives, as I have said earlier, not from a real collision, but from superficial thinking, from a lack of self-awareness, of grasp of one's own values.

Such Catholics need only to reflect a little on their sense of coercion to realize that whatever force they are aware of *does not come from outside...*; the force comes from within. They are not being forced by the authority of

the Church; they are being forced *by their own belief in the authority of the Church*. The teaching of the Church, after all, gains its force only from personal conviction. It holds sway only over the mind that is convinced of its truth. They are being forced, therefore, by their own free conviction, or whatever remains of their own free conviction, that the Church's teaching is divinely guaranteed. They are in effect being forced *by their own conscience!*

This apparently paradoxical conclusion becomes all the more evident if one remembers that conscience is a deep-rooted faculty of moral judgment which judges in accordance with its own terms of reference, with the principles it holds and with the evidence it sees in each case. What happens to the Catholic, in the cases we are considering, is that his conscience may see evidence in one direction, on the one hand, and *his same conscience* sees evidence in an opposed direction, on the other. Let us suppose that the issue in question is that of artificial birth-control. On the one hand, he sees considerations which seem to argue that contraception is necessary and therefore permissible (demographic or psychological arguments, etc.) and his mind is swayed by these considerations. On the other hand, he sees considerations which argue that contraception is wrong (the traditional teaching of the Church, repeated in *Humanae Vitae*) [3], and his *mind is also swayed by these considerations*, but in the contrary direction. He must judge which evidence sways with him most. If he judges in favor of the Church's teaching, it is because his conscience still freely accepts that the Church is upheld by Christ.

It is not true, in his case, to say that his conscience is in opposition to authority. Belief in the trustworthiness of the Church's authority is *part* of his conscience - because he has freely chosen to make it part. The whole point is that

the Church's authority influences him *only insofar as he FREELY accepts it* [4].

What we are discussing therefore is not so much a conflict of conscience, as a conflict *within* conscience... It is a conflict not between personal conscience and an external enforced principle, but between principles which personal conscience *freely holds but finds hard to reconcile*. If there is a conflict of conscience, it is precisely because conscience is divided against itself. *It is not conscience against the Church, but conscience against conscience*. The consequence is clear: if a man wishes to protest about an interior conflict brought about by principles which he has personally and freely accepted, he should really protest to no one but himself.

## **Freedom and trustworthy authority**

The two terms - freedom and authority - therefore are not necessarily in irreconcilable opposition. If authority is understood as *arbitrary will*, then it does clearly stand in opposition to individual freedom. But if it is understood - as it ought to be in relation to the Magisterium of the Church - as a competent source of reliable information, as an authoritative and therefore trustworthy guide to man's true life-goal, then it is seen to be not the opponent to personal freedom, but the key to its fruitful exercise.

## **Freedom is found close to Christ**

The first Christians were men and women who, after groping for long in the dark, had suddenly been offered an extraordinary goal to their life, and had seen - opened and signposted before them - the road to that goal. At last they had the freedom, not to wander aimlessly, but

to go Somewhere! It is true that they would never have acquired this sense of freedom - the freedom to travel - if they had not originally been looking for some worthwhile goal to life. But the strikingly joyous character of their freedom was above all due to the absolute confidence they felt they could put in the indications of Him who had signposted the road they were following. *He* could not deceive them.

The man to whom freedom means following the impulses or instincts of each moment might do well to ask himself if this is not the freedom to wander in the dark or, at least, to go round in ever-narrowing circles. To such a man, in any event, it is obvious that any voice from outside which claims to speak objective truth, and to set a goal to life that is valid and binding for all men, will appear as an enemy of his freedom.

To those however for whom life is a road upwards towards a definite destination, and for whom in consequence freedom means finding that road and being able to follow it, the mere possibility that at a certain point along the line of human history someone arrived *from* that destination, so as to signpost the road for us, appears as electrifying. If, on checking this man's life and credentials, they become convinced that his indications are trustworthy, that what he has said is true - because he is the truth itself, because he is God! - then his indications appear not as restraints placed on man, not as burdens or obligations, but as immense rays of light - lighting up the way before each man, enabling him to see his way *forward*, so that he can travel it energetically, securely and freely.

Close to Christ, one finds freedom. Listening to his voice, at last one sees one's way clearly. His authority does not oppress, because it merits confidence, because it is

seen to be trustworthy. His authority teaches, as a signpost teaches, and a man is glad to follow it, and follows it freely.

Those who do not believe in the truth, or do not believe in Christ - or those who, even if they regard themselves as Christians, cannot find Christ in the Church - will regard any exercise of teaching authority in the Church as a threat to freedom. Those who see reasons to trust the Church's authority - because they see in it the voice of Christ ('Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me' (Lk 10:16), and believe that the voice of Christ does not deceive but speaks the truth - will regard the teaching authority of the Church as an ally of their freedom. 'You will learn the truth and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32).

## NOTES

[1] One should follow an erroneous conscience - *unless one is aware of, or suspects, the error*. The error here lies in failing to see Christ present in the teaching of the Church. As to the consequences of this error, cf. not only what follows in the text above but also paragraph (B) of note [2] in chapter 3.

[2] In speaking of the authority or the teaching authority (the 'Magisterium') of the Church, it should be clear that I refer to the teaching - in matters of belief or conduct - which the Pope or an Ecumenical Council, in the name of the mission they have received from Christ, present as true or binding to all the faithful. I do not of course refer to the teaching of any Church pastor, or group of pastors - however authoritatively put forward - which merely expresses personal or private viewpoints.

[3] Many people who are swayed by the apparent force of the human arguments in favor of contraception (e.g. the



population explosion) also feel the counterforce of the *human* arguments against (e.g. the argument that if contraceptive sex is licit in marriage, one can show no clear or compelling reason why it may not be licit outside marriage; or the argument that a contraceptive sexual act is clearly a *limited* act of self-donation and surrender, so much so that one can no longer find in it the elements that could make it an adequate and unique expression of the unlimited and exclusive surrender proper to marriage). In the main text above, however, we are taking the extreme case of the person who has not considered or has not seen the *logical* objections to contraception, and is therefore left solely with what appears as a *theological* objection (if the Church has been wrong for so many years in her ordinary teaching about birth-control, then Christ has failed in his promises to his Church).

[4] In speaking of authority one may be speaking of political force which restrains the *physical* freedom of the individual. One should not confuse this form of coercive authority - which is particularly repugnant to the modern mind - with *moral* authority which sways the *mind* according to the persuasiveness of its principles. This is a truly free and democratic authority. Such is the authority of the Church.

## 07. FREEDOM AND THE CHURCH

### **Clear beliefs**

No more than thirty years ago, the Catholic Church appeared to many people as a stronghold of firm faith and clear moral principles in the midst of a drifting and disoriented world. One knew *what* it meant to be a Catholic: in what things a Catholic believed, and what things he rejected. A Catholic believed in the Blessed Trinity, in the Incarnation, in an infallible Church. He believed in original sin and in the Redemption; in the sacraments and the need for prayer. When he went to Mass on Sundays he knew he was attending a sacrifice. He believed in the real presence of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. He knew he could not go to Communion if he were in mortal sin, and he had a clear notion of which things were mortal sins, and which were merely venial; he had in short a clear idea of the nature of sin as an offense against God, and of the need to confess one's grave sins. He venerated the Blessed Virgin Mary, and trusted in the intercession of the saints and the angels. He believed that contraception, divorce and abortion were gravely wrong. And he believed ever so many things more.

### **Where has all the clearness gone?**

No one, until recently, ever thought of presenting the way of a follower of Christ as an easy way (Christ certainly did not present it so). But at least - in the Catholic Church - it seemed a *clear* way. One saw where it went and where it could not go. The steps by which one followed it could at times be difficult steps, but one knew which steps to take. That is how things were, until recently.

Suddenly - or so it must seem to many Catholics - everything has changed. This clear way has been plunged into darkness. The clarity and unanimity have disappeared. It is as if one no longer knew - because one is no longer taught - what it means to be a Catholic and what is incompatible with being one. Or rather, if one were to go by certain views, one could say that there is a new idea, a sort of new ideal, of what it means 'to be a Catholic'. In these views, to be a Catholic today means to profess a vague belief in God (without any special type of duties towards him), and a general sense of community towards other men. It means to be a follower of a religion whose main demands seem to be formulated on a social level, being directed as often as not towards 'structures', and at times taking on a markedly political character [1].

Of what was considered fundamental 30 years ago in the formulation of a Catholic conscience, what is it that one hears? Practically nothing: practically nothing about the worship we owe to God and to the Blessed Sacrament, nor about the obligation to go to Mass, nor about the need for personal prayer, nor the nature of sin as an offense against God, nor of the need for repentance and purpose of amendment and sacramental confession. The disorientation is particularly striking - well nigh complete - in the field of sexual conduct. Many people, in positions of apparent authority, maintain that masturbation is no sin; that contraception is lawful; that divorce and remarriage should be permitted; that there is nothing wrong with homosexual behavior (as distinct from homosexual orientation); that abortion in certain cases is not against the law of God.

What is one to make of this situation? Above all, in the midst of such confusion is it possible to find any sure guidelines for our conscience and for our conduct?

We cannot overlook the fact that some people regard this situation as highly positive. For them, it constitutes an enormous advance and is proof that we in the Church have at last 'come of age' and achieved a real maturity. They applaud this new and fluid situation that they see within the Church, as one that favors individual freedom. And their attitude towards questions of faith or moral conduct - which, they say, were formerly subjected to rigid and monolithic rules - is that they should now be left to the free decision of *personal* conscience.

Now perhaps the first comment to be made about this attitude is that it is tremendously ambiguous. In one extreme it may represent nothing new. At the opposite extreme it could be pure heresy. And, in any case, it evidently *solves* nothing.

If this attitude means no more than what it says - that personal decisions should be freely decided by personal conscience - this is indeed to say no-thing new. It is simply to say what the Church has always taught. Catholics have always taken their decisions personally and freely. If they did not, the decisions would not be theirs, nor could they be considered responsible for them. If, however, this new attitude means that Catholics have acquired a new maturity in their free moral decisions because they need no longer listen to or follow the teaching of the Church, this is clearly heresy. It is the Lutherean heresy of private interpretation applied not only to Holy Scripture, but to any and every rule of faith or morality. But it is not just heresy, it is an aberration. Far from representing an advance or a conquest for freedom, it marks a pathetic retrogression.

It will help to explain this if we first say a few words about conscience itself, which is that faculty we possess of judging the morality of our actions: their moral goodness or

badness. It is obvious that conscience, in making its judgments, must follow certain principles or norms. And it is equally obvious that if conscience is governed by mistaken principles, its judgments will be mistaken. If someone in such a situation acts according to his conscience, his conduct will be *sincere*, but it will also be mistaken (or misguided); and it may well do harm to others.

One could give thousands of examples: a teacher who thinks that racial discrimination is a good thing, a politician who believes in class warfare, a businessman who thinks he is justified in sharp practices, a father - such as Bertrand Russell - who believes that free love is a good thing and so educates his children. .... Can a person who maintains such viewpoints be sincere? Can he be really following his conscience in professing them? We cannot know; only God (and perhaps the person himself) knows. But we do know that such a person is mistaken, and that if he is really following his conscience, his conscience has deceived him.

All of this underlines a self-evident principle (and the fact that some people today deny it or seem to overlook it does not make it any less self-evident): that to be *sincere* is not always the same as *to be right*; these are two distinct concepts that do not necessarily coincide.

## **Conscience is not infallible**

This brief parenthesis should make it easier to assess the suggestion we are examining: that conscience has reached a new maturity that frees it from any need to look for guidance to the Church's teaching.

This suggestion could pass if we had any guarantee that our conscience is infallible and cannot deceive us. If

this were the case, then we could solve any problem of moral conduct without the slightest obligation or need to look for standards of conduct outside ourselves. Our own infallible conscience would be the all-reliable source of these standards.

Does any of us really believe things are so? Does experience not teach us that, far from being infallible, our conscience can go wrong and does in fact frequently and easily go wrong? Given this, then, the attitude of those who maintain that each individual conscience should solve all moral questions on its own - that is, without any reference whatsoever to any type of external guidance or advice or authority - can only be classified as a foolish and empty attitude. It appears as an attitude either of enormous pride - the attitude of those who despite all evidence to the contrary, endow their own conscience with infallibility (precisely with the infallibility that they themselves resolutely deny to the Church) - or else of enormous childishness: the attitude of those who, when faced with the evidence, prefer not to think.

Such an attitude, in any event, can only appear as a solution to those who prefer not to be burdened with any genuine moral norm, who *do not want* to be given any true standard of goodness and badness whereby to govern their actions.

## **Deciding for oneself...**

It is really only pride, or a reluctance to think, that can complicate a matter which, when all is said and done, a little common sense shows to be very simple. I think we can make this clear if we suggest a parallel in another area. Let us imagine that two people set out on a journey together and come to a crossroads. One says to the other: 'And now,

which road should we take?' And the other replies: 'Let us decide for ourselves. Let us decide the matter on our own account, but, whatever we do, do not let us think of consulting that map you have in the glove compartment, or of asking that policeman. Let us not admit that we are men of such immature and limited personality that we have to look to other people to help us. Let us not undermine our freedom by consulting others. Let us decide the matter by ourselves, in all freedom, and exclusively on our own account'.

His companion will most probably reply, 'Don't be an idiot. Of course it is we who are going to decide. That is not the problem. The problem is to know what decision to take: to know what is the right decision. Of course I want to exercise my freedom and I mean to do so. But, in doing so, I want - if possible - not to put my foot in it. Here we have several roads before us, and I know that only one can lead us to our destination. Therefore it is easy to go wrong here, and I would like, if it is possible, to be certain that in choosing I am not going wrong. What I therefore need right now is more information; then I will feel free to decide. This does not mean that I am prepared to accept information from any source. But it does mean that I will accept it from anyone or anything that merits my confidence. Those signposts put up by the local authorities, for example, I imagine that they are trustworthy. I doubt they have been put there in order to lead the public astray. Or that map: my feeling is that it must be the result of a lot of study and experience. Or that policeman: he ought to know where the roads lead to. It's his job, and I doubt that he is going to lie to us. Therefore, I read the signposts, I look at the map, I ask the policeman and, following their indications, I drive on... Do you really think that I have proved myself to be a man of lesser personality or diminished freedom for doing so?'

## Knowing where the road leads

Similarly, when faced with a moral decision, one is faced with the possibility of making a right decision or a wrong one, of pleasing God or creating obstacles between him and us, of creating a happier human life for ourselves or of undermining that life. In such a situation any reflecting person tries to foresee where his choices may take him. He wants information about the results of the various possible decisions before him.

To react so, in the face of any problem of personal conduct, is to act in conscience and intelligently. To act otherwise is a result of pride or stupidity. It is certainly not the result of *thinking*.

Some people today, in the name of freedom - of the personal right of each one to decide freely for himself - seem bent on tearing down all the road signs, on defacing any type of indication culled from the experience of the past. Such 'liberalism' appears truly grotesque to me. Nevertheless it seems to take in quite a few people. Or is it that quite a few people prefer to be taken in by it?

I cannot help feeling that it is a poor service to humanity and to the cause of freedom to cry out to those who stand at the crossroads of moral choice - crossroads now stripped of all signposts - 'Now you can do what you like'... Surely, what the vast majority of people like to do at the crossroads is precisely to know where the roads lead to! - whether this road, despite its apparent steepness, will lead me to my destination; whether this other road, however attractive it may appear, will not lead me there because it eventually runs out in the sands of the desert...



I know that I can do what I like. But I also know that I must face up to the consequences of what I do. I know too that there are many things by which I am easily attracted - things that appeal to my ambition or my passions, for instance - but which are incapable of giving me either earthly happiness or that of Heaven, and are very capable of destroy-ing my potential for any type of happiness whatsoever.

Therefore the only sensible thing to do at a moral crossroads, is to find out exactly where the various roads go, and so be able to foresee the consequences of what one is about to do or choose. Whence or from whom can we get that more accurate information that we need if we are to make the right choices? From various sources.

## **The rights of conscience**

We can get that information, in part, precisely from conscience, always provided we bear in mind that to listen to one's conscience is a much more demanding process than some people may think. Some of those who appeal to conscience today seem to regard it as a seal of approval that they can, at will, stamp on any action they feel like doing. And conscience is not that. It is not a servile appendix of our selfishness or comfort, a ready yes-man to our passions or prejudices. It is an imperious voice whose message is often expressed in an implacable 'No'.

We hear a lot today about the rights of conscience. Yet, I feel that we hear little about what seems to me the main right among all conscientious rights: the right of conscience to be taken seriously, to be heeded, even when what it is saying to us is 'No'. One has to have a keen ear if one is to catch all that conscience is saying. And one needs to have an upright will if one is to follow it [2].

At the same time, not all the information we possess or can acquire, in order to judge the goodness or badness of our actions, comes from our conscience. All of that information ought to be in our conscience, but not all of it comes from our conscience as from its primary source. It comes *from outside*. Let us try to explain what we mean.

We have a certain innate sense of moral good and evil, but it is very rudimentary. Some people, in a similar way, possess a peculiar sense of geographical orientation which undoubtedly helps them - at the crossroads - when they have to choose between the several roads before them [3]. If they are sensible, however, they will not trust themselves exclusively to this simple sense of direction (which in any case is probably largely based on something exterior: the position of the sun for instance). If they are sensible, they will act as we have suggested earlier on; they will look around to see if there are any signposts, or they will buy a map, or consult a traffic patrolman. And they will pay heed to the indications that they receive in this way, to the extent to which they feel that these external sources of information merit their confidence.

At the crossroads of our moral decisions it is only natural that we should act similarly. It is logical that we examine our conscience, to see what it has to say to us. But it is also logical that we should look to see if anyone else besides our conscience, anyone meriting trust, has anything to say to us about those decisions and their possible consequences. If it turns out in the end that no one has said anything, well then, that is just too bad! There will be nothing for it but to decide the matter on our own, despite the fact that we know our conscience may be mistaken and may be urging us down some path that ends in bitterness.

**When it is God who speaks**

For a Catholic, the situation is clear. We are not alone at the crossroads. We have not been left on our own before our moral decisions. God is with us. He has something to say to us, more or less clearly, at each crossroads, at each moral decision.

It is in fact God himself who wishes to speak to us, from within our conscience. That is why conscience is sometimes described as the voice of God speaking inside us. This is all right as far as it goes. But the very fact that conscience is fallible means that we can misinterpret that voice of God when he tries to speak to us from within.

So conscience is not enough. There must be something else. And this brings us to a point of the greatest importance. The main guide we possess, to help us in our moral decisions, speaks to us not from within, but *from without*. The voice of God has spoken about so many, so very many, moral questions. And that voice has spoken *outside* us, and outside (over and beyond) any simply subjective impressions. It has spoken in the most objective and clearest terms. That voice spoke already in the Old Testament (what are the Ten Commandments but divinely given moral standards?) and it has spoken above all in Jesus Christ.

If Jesus is God, he is - as indeed he claimed to be - the very Truth itself (Jn 14:6), who can neither be mistaken nor lead us astray. And when he speaks clearly about some moral question - about divorce, for example: "Let man not separate what God has joined together" (Mt 19:6) - that absolutely settles the matter for any Christian. It becomes a subject about which there can no longer be the slightest doubt. If God prohibits divorce - as contrary to the essential nature of marriage - then all the opinion polls or referendums or parliamentary votes in the world cannot

annul or affect that divine prohibition. Referendums or acts of parliament can make divorce - or abortion or euthanasia - *legal* in this country or that. But there is nothing that can make them *moral*. When we have God's word about the lawfulness or unlawfulness of something, the contrary votes of men are always votes in the minority.

## **When God seems to have nothing to say**

There are however matters about which God seems not to have spoken to us in Scripture. Many examples may spring to mind such, for instance, as drug-taking or the problems posed by population growth. Here certainly are two subjects of which no mention seems to be made in Scripture. Does this mean - we ask - that God has nothing to say to us about these matters?

It is worth noting that this question can be put in two ways, or rather, in two tones. It can be put as if it were the question of someone who reaches a crossroads, looks around, sees (or thinks he sees) no signposts, and says to himself: "What luck! God apparently has not yet come this way. He has forgotten to signpost this crossroads. Here he has said nothing. And that leaves me free to do whatever I feel like". Or one can put the same question but in the tone of voice of someone who, on arriving and seeing no visible signpost, asks himself: "But is it possible that there are no signs here? Is it possible that at this crossroads, where I have to take an important decision, God has nothing to say to me, that he is not prepared to help me or guide me?"

This is the tone in which I feel the question should be put. I imagine that, on some occasion or other, we have all felt that Christ's contemporaries had the enormous advantage of being able to consult God himself about their doubts, and of being able to receive his advice directly. It is

only logical to feel a sort of envy towards them. Anyone who follows the elementary Christian custom of devoting a few minutes each day to reading Christ's life in the Gospels, will feel himself drawn by Our Lord's voice with its accent of infinite tenderness, love and encouragement; and sooner or later he is bound to ask himself: "Where is that voice today? Is it possible that it has ceased to sound in this world of ours?" And he will not rest content until he discovers it and can follow it. As one thinks of the Apostles in their daily conversation with Our Lord, it is only natural to reflect, "What advantages they had!" and perhaps even to pose the question: "Is it not a little bit unfair that we cannot enjoy the same advantage? Has it been our bad luck to have arrived too late - or that he should have come too early - for us to be able to hear his voice?"

The answer is that we are *not* deprived of that privilege. Christ also speaks for us. He also speaks today. He does so through his Church. When the Church speaks to us in the name of Christ we have the guarantee that it is the voice of Christ that is speaking to us. *He* gave us that guarantee when he said to his apostles: "Whoever listens to you, listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16).

It is logical. The truth of Christ does not vary, but it has to be applied to each new situation. Human nature and destiny are always the same, but each epoch can bring new human situations which have to be focused in the light of salvation.

In the world of 2000 years ago the problem posed by demographic growth did not exist; the pill did not exist, nor did so many modern methods of euthanasia or abortion. But God has not permitted that these problems - or others that may arise in the future - should be problems situated

at crossroads devoid of any type of divine signposting - problems whose complexity makes us look in anguish to God in the hope that he will tell us how we should deal with them, only to see him turn his back on us and utter a disconcerting "No comment".

## **Christ continues to speak**

No. Our Lord, who said "I will be with you always even until the end of the world" (Mt 28:20), has not left us in the dark about these problems. He has spoken, and speaks, about them in all clearness. And he has done so, and continues to do so, in and through his Church. But - someone may well object - how can you assert that Christ in his Church speaks clearly to us about contraception or even about divorce or abortion, in a moment when the Church itself seems to be a babble of contradictory voices about these problems. The objection brings us back to the point at which we began our essay.

It is true that many voices are raised in the Church affirming contradictory things about these subjects. But this should not represent the slightest difficulty for a Catholic *with a minimum of formation*. This does not mean that Christ has ceased to speak in his Church, that he has somehow lapsed into silence. It simply means - at the worst - that some Christians have ceased to listen to him. Or perhaps what has happened is that they have forgotten towards what quarter - towards whom - they should turn their ears in order to hear his voice. It could also mean, insofar as there has been a lapse into silence, that it has been on the part of some pastors whose mission and responsibility is to be spokesmen for the truth of Christ. But not even this - were it actually to occur in some particular case - should disconcert a moderately formed Catholic, or shake his faith.

It is all a question of knowing where the voice of Christ is to be heard; through which organs he speaks. And this is a simple matter. Christ's voice speaks to us not only in the Gospel, but in the faith of always. It speaks to us in the tradition and teaching that the Church has maintained clearly and constantly through the centuries, and in those genuine acts of the magisterium which, from time to time, give an answer to what is, or appears to be, a new question.

## **Can the Church be mistaken?**

When the Church as a whole believes some point of faith or morals, it is not possible that the entire Church should be mistaken on that point. Such an error would imply that Christ had not been capable of fulfilling his promises: "Whoever listens to you listens to me" (Lk 10:16), and "The gates of hell" - which particularly means the powers of error - "will not prevail against my Church" (cf. Mt 16:18). And this is simply impossible.

For example, it was not possible - and I am referring to the centuries *prior* to the definitions of the Council of Trent - that the Church should have been in error about the Real Presence. It was not possible that Christ should have allowed his followers, during more than a thousand years, to worship idolatrously what was no more than a bit of bread. Similarly it was not possible that the Church, even before the dogmatic definition of 1950, should have been wrong in its belief in the Assumption of Our Lady.

I would emphasize that these points of Catholic belief enjoyed a guarantee of infallibility even *before* they had been dogmatically defined. This point needs to be insisted upon because at times there exists the idea that the obligatoriness (as some would term it) or the guarantee

of the truth (as I would prefer to express it) of a point of faith only arises after a dogmatic definition has been handed down. This is not so. Dogmatic definitions are obviously infallible. But they can only be given about points of faith that are already believed in. And the only things that they add in regard to those points of faith is a greater precision in the way of expressing them (which makes it really difficult to misinterpret their genuine meaning), and the consequence - for anyone who denies them - of committing formal heresy.

The Popes and the Ecumenical Councils under the Popes have been defining points of belief from the earliest times. Practically twenty centuries of dogmatic definitions have made it extremely difficult to find a single point of Catholic doctrine whose content is not unmistakably clear. Nevertheless, if an apparently new problem were to turn up and there did not seem to be any clear and unanimous teaching about it, any Catholic with a minimum of formation knows that one person alone is qualified to clarify the question and to pass judgment on it in the name of Christ, for this mission has been entrusted by Our Lord to one person alone. And that person is the Pope: "You are Peter, and it is on this rock that I will build my Church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:18-19). And "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15-17).

The Church has always believed (and 100 years ago in the First Vatican Council, finally defined as a divinely revealed dogma) that "the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra* - that is, when in the fulfillment of his mission as pastor and teacher of all Christians he exercises his supreme apostolic authority to define that some doctrine of faith or morals should be maintained by the whole



Church - , in virtue of the divine assistance which was promised to him in the person of the blessed apostle Peter, enjoys that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer wished his Church to be endowed in the definition of doctrine concerning faith and morals; and therefore the definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves and not in virtue of the consent of the Church" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, cap. 4, Denz, 1839). Furthermore, the Church has always believed that the Pope has full power to govern the Church itself, and that the same respect and obedience are due to his authority as are due to the authority of Christ: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven..." [4]

## **Humanae vitae**

It would not be surprising if all of this were to make us think of the *Humanae Vitae* controversy. As is well known, some Catholics maintain that since the Pope did not say expressly in the encyclical that he wished to give an infallible definition, its teaching may be fallible and we are therefore free to differ from it. I would make three comments on this viewpoint:

1) The encyclical appears as a solemn act of the Pope's magisterium. It is addressed to all the faithful. And it sets out to give a judgment on a moral question on the greatest importance for everyday life. In the encyclical the Pope, having weighed the apparent arguments which are generally adduced in favor of contraception, says: "We, *by virtue of the mandate entrusted to us by Christ*, intend to give our reply to this series of grave questions" (no. 6). In other words, the Pope deliberately and solemnly hands down his decision in his capacity as Vicar of Christ and pastor of all the faithful.

2) We should add that what is at stake here is not the red-herring issue of whether an encyclical is infallible or not. After all, *Humanae Vitae* said nothing new. It simply reaffirmed the previous teaching of the Church, i.e. what the Church had been teaching for centuries. This can be easily checked upon. It's simply a question of consulting any Catholic textbook of moral theology published before 1960. *Not a single one* will be found that defends the lawfulness of contraceptives. For hundreds of years, the Church - the whole Church - has been teaching and believing explicitly that contraception is a grave sin. It is simply inconceivable that Christ should have permitted his Church to be in error in this belief, so burdening many people's consciences with a sense of sin where in reality there was no sin. Obviously it is not the value of an encyclical, but the infallibility of the entire Church that is at stake.

What then is to be said about those priests who teach that contraception is licit? What is to be said - and it should be said quite clearly - is that they are teaching *contrary* to the Church's teaching, and that they are, therefore, in error. The mission and responsibility of the ordinary priest, as of the ordinary layman, is to follow the magisterium of the Church, and these priests set themselves up against the magisterium [5].

## **Those who do not obey**

3) I would say, in the last place, that even if someone failed to see how the Church's teaching on contraception is necessarily loaded with infallibility, another motive should alone be sufficient to make him accept the teaching, and that is the motive of *discipline*. Even if he believed that this is a reformable point of Catholic teaching, and was firmly convinced that in time it will be modified, he

sins if he does not observe it now when it has not, in fact, been modified, when it is still, at least, a *disciplinary* law of the Church.

The Church's laws concerning Sunday Mass, Lenten fasting, or priestly celibacy, for example, are disciplinary laws. The Church could modify or abolish them. But, as long as it does not do so, they oblige in conscience. And if a layman or priest does not observe them - on the grounds that he does not see their point, that they do not seem to him suited to our 'modern mentality', etc. - he sins. The same sin of disobedience is committed by those who fail to observe, or who preach against, the law given by the Church about contraception. However much they may regard it as 'modifiable' law, for as long as it has not been modified, they sin by breaking the law that is still binding.

Some of those priests who preach the lawfulness of contraceptives may not perhaps be prepared to acknowledge that they are in error; but they cannot deny that they are *disobeying*, in opposition to what God and the Church ask of them and in opposition also to what they themselves solemnly and freely pro-mised at their ordination [6]. Let them recall the words which the Pope addressed to them towards the end of *Humanae Vitae*: "It is your principal duty - We are speaking especially to you who teach moral theology - to expound the Church's teaching with regard to marriage in its entirety and with complete frankness. In the performance of your ministry you must be the first to give an example of that sincere obedience, inward as well as out-ward, which is due to the Magisterium of the Church" (no. 28).

It is sad that such cases of disobedience should occur. Nevertheless, the disobedience of a priest, however much a motive of scandal for a lay person, is not a sufficient

motive to justify the lay person's disobedience as well. If a layman has to choose between trusting in the word or opinion of a priest or of a theologian - whoever he may be, and how-ever great his reputation - and trusting in the word and the teaching of the Pope, he well knows in whom he should trust and whom Christ wants him to obey [7].

## **Things that Christ can ask of us**

Christ, as we have pointed out, continues to speak to us as in the times of the apostles. He continues to speak to us in the voice of his Church. And it is as urgent as ever to want to hear his voice and follow his commandments. As ought to be obvious, that voice of Christ can ask us for loyalty and obedience, not only when an *ex cathedra* point of doctrine is at issue... [8] not only in matters of faith or morals...; but also in matters of discipline (for example, in the way in which the Sacraments are to be administered or Holy Mass celebrated or heard) where, at least in principle, no dogmatic questions may seem to be in question.

Our Lord endowed his Church with power not only to teach but also to *govern*. And his words - "whoever listens to you listens to me; and whoever rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16) - apply equally to the disciplinary measures or decisions of government taken by the Church; for instance the liturgical directions given by the Holy See.

In virtue of what principle or of what spirit is one no longer obliged to obey these disciplinary laws? Certainly not in virtue of the spirit of Christ; nor in virtue of a supposed conciliar spirit, however much some persons seem to believe (and if they do not believe it, they certainly suggest it) that the Council gave the green light for any and every type of liturgical innovation. It would be good to remind them that the Council states, in the clearest terms, that

"absolutely no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority" [9].

If priests do not heed their bishops, or bishops do not heed the Holy See, it is only common sense to suppose that the ordinary faithful will have little inclination to heed their priests. Nothing destroys the prestige of authority so quickly as arbitrariness. And when an authority does not obey the authority that lies above it, it acts arbitrarily. The most curious part of it all is the persistent attempts to justify such arbitrary actions in the name of a supposed 'community sense', when their blatantly obvious effect is to rupture the ecclesial unity willed by Christ.

## **An unmentionable word?**

Obedience is a word that no popular preacher (or, rather, no preacher whose concern is to be popular) would dream of mentioning nowadays. Nevertheless, popular or unpopular, it is and always will be a subject (or, more accurately, a virtue) which needs to be emphasized, simply because without obedience we are not going to be saved. Salvation does not depend on having humanitarian or pious sentiments, and much less still on having squeezed oneself a place on the latest civil or ecclesiastical bandwagon. Salvation depends on fulfilling the will of God. Our Lord himself has told us so in words that should set us on our guard against possible self-deception: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21).

These words of Our Lord could hardly be stronger or clearer. And they simply shoot to pieces many of the 'arguments' by which some people today feel they can

reduce the demands of Christian living. The arguments, for example, with which some Christians feel they have demolished the Third Commandment: "But can't one speak with God anywhere? Then I don't see any need for going to Mass on Sundays." Without going deeper into the matter [10], it should be enough to reply to these people (reminding them of the passage just quoted from St Matthew): "You are quite right saying that one can talk to God anywhere. But that is not the point. The point is that if you talk to God elsewhere (do you?), but do not go to Mass on Sundays, you are saying 'Lord, Lord', but you are not fulfilling the will of God. And you may be forfeiting your entry visa to Heaven.

Let us emphasize the point. If one wishes to obey God's will, then it is essential to obey those whom he has constituted in authority with the mission to govern his Church. St Paul also reminds us of this, and his words can scarcely be said to be lacking in force: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Rom 13:1-2). In the text, St Paul is speaking of obedience to legitimate civil authority. His words have obviously much greater force when it is a question of obedience to authority within the Church. He goes on immediately to add a remark that is worth noting. "Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience" (Rom 5:5). Some contemporary Christians, especially those lay people and ecclesiastics who seem to specialize in conscientious objection, would do well to meditate on these last words of the Apostle. He preaches obedience to authority. He insists that it is essential to salvation. But he does not want us to obey out of fear or with a sense of coercion. He wants us to

obey precisely out of motives of conscience; because our conscience has understood that it is reasonable and good and noble to obey, and encourages us to do so; and we have listened to our conscience, and have obeyed personally and freely.

## **'Love means deeds'**

It is an extraordinary fact, but some people nowadays seem to regard obedience as something that necessarily degrades the human person and destroys his personality and freedom. They do not seem capable of understanding that someone can obey because he chooses to, because he feels that it is worthwhile placing his possibilities - above all, his mind and his will - at the service of something greater, of someone greater, than his own ego. In a word, they do not understand that someone can obey *out of love*, because he wants to love another person, and he realizes that the distinctive movement of love is to want to do the will of the loved one.

The person who does not understand love so - as the effective desire to do the will of the loved person - and does not try to live it so, has not the slightest idea of what love means. He is an egoist, and is not likely to find happiness either here or hereafter.

"Love means deeds" [11]. In the Gospel, Our Lord time and again asks us for deeds. Let us recall some of his words which tell us that if we want to love him, we must keep his commandments - we must fulfill his will - and that whoever does not fulfill it, whoever does not obey, does not love him. In the first place, he himself gives the example. He tells us that he has not come to do his own will, but the will of his Father (Jn 6:38; 5:30). Loving us with deeds, he loved us, in his passion, 'to the end' (Jn 13:1), obeying

'unto death' (Phil 2:8). And despite the repugnance it caused him, he persevered in that voluntary and total obedience: "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). He could truly say: "I have given you an example so that you also may do as I have done" (Jn 13:15). But then he insists, and there's no getting away from his insistence: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). He repeats it: "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me" (Jn 14:21). And still again: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word" (Jn 14:23). And once more: He who does not love does not keep my words" (Jn 14:24).

## **Reluctance to love God?**

In certain sectors of the Church today there seems to be an abundance of people whose attitude is one of constant protest against authority. Has it ever struck them that, whatever may at times be said in favor of their protests, one thing can certainly be said against: that they are a clear sign of a reluctance to love God?

If we are really interested in achieving that principal aim of our Christian existence - which is to love God above all things - what are we protesting about? That the Commandments prevent us from loving him? That the magisterium prevents us from loving him? That Church authority prevents us from loving him? Far from making it difficult for us to love God, these are the channels through which he himself wants us to prove our love for him. Nothing can stop us loving God, if we want to obey him. Therefore, if we want to love him, let us obey. And if we do not obey, then the fact is that we do not want to love him. We do not want to love God above all other things, but rather want to put our love for other things - our opinions, our sensuality, our pride - above our love for God.



It is logical that we should find it *hard* to fulfill a commandment. After all, if it were something simple that we were being asked to fulfill, there would be no need to raise it to the rank of a commandment. Given the weakness of our human nature, it may be logical that we find it hard to obey authority. But it is Jesus Christ Himself who points out that it is precisely there - in the fulfillment or unfulfillment of the Commandments, in obedience or disobedience towards his Church - that the difference lies between loving him or not loving him.

Our Lord - if we may say it with all reverence - was never one to beat around the bush. Fence-sitting or non-alignment postures just don't go down, where he is concerned. "Whoever is not with me, is against me" (Mt 12:30), may be unpalatable words to some ears, but they are certainly quite clear. After reflecting on them, it is easier to grasp the deep truth expressed by that phrase in *The Way*: "Jesus: wherever you have passed no heart remains indifferent. You are either loved or hated" [12]

## **To be ... Christ's, ... or not to be**

One of the descriptions which Jesus applied to himself is that of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11-16). If we are to judge by St John's Gospel, it was a description Our Lord was particularly fond of. It is not surprising then that the Early Christians specially cherished this image of Christ the Good Shepherd. It is also obvious that, as they followed out the Gospel parable, they must have had no objection to considering themselves 'sheep' of Christ's flock.

It is possible that some Christians nowadays may not be frightfully enthused at the idea of considering themselves sheep. Nevertheless, since it is a figure that Our Lord used on more than one occasion, it looks as if it has to

be taken in earnest. This conclusion becomes well-nigh inescapable when we recall that when Jesus describes those who are saved in the last Judgment (Mt 25:33), he once again uses the term 'sheep', and that the only alternative classification in that tremendous moment is that of a 'goat', separated forever from the vision of God.

Our Lord is not being trite in using the metaphor of the Good Shepherd and the sheep. He is not being merely poetic either. He wishes to teach us a deep lesson. He wants to reveal consoling truths to us and asks us for a mature response and a readiness to face up to difficult demands. In narrating the parable, Our Lord already anticipates the fact of his death: "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:11). He indicates the infinite reward which he gives to those who follow him: "My sheep hear my voice... and I give them eternal life" (Jn 10:27-28). But he *asks* us to recognize his voice and to *follow* him: "The sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice" (Jn 10:4) ..."my sheep hear my voice, and follow me" (Jn 10:27).

There may be other sheep-like characteristics which Our Lord wants us to imitate, but I doubt it. What one cannot doubt - because it is the very essence of the parable - is that he wants us to imitate the sheep's typical *docility*. To recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow it docilely, that is what he asks of us. And at times that can be hard, because human pride is reluctant to be docile. Nevertheless, there will be one further occasion still when Our Lord returns to the subject, and maintains the same image in doing so. After the Resurrection he confirms Peter (despite his evident defects) in his position as visible head of his Church. He confirms him as Head and Shepherd. He tells him three times: "Feed my lambs... Feed my sheep... Feed my sheep..." (Jn 21:15, 16 and 17).

Could Our Lord give us clearer teachings or guarantees or criteria? "I know mine and mine know me" (Jn 10:14). And he wants the sheep to be able to know that they are *his*, because recognizing the voice of the Good Shepherd, they follow it docilely.

How urgent it is then that each one of us should ask himself constantly: "And how about me? Have I the right to count myself among those who are *his*? Do I know - do I recognize - his voice? Do I follow it? Am I able to distinguish where that voice sounds? Do I know who has the mission to echo it here on earth?"

To be his... To be Christ's, which means to be God's... (cf. 1 Cor 3:23). How terrible it would be to merit that devastating reproach which Our Lord addressed to the Pharisees: "He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (Jn 8:47).

A Christian is expected to have the elementary capacity to see and hear Christ in the Church, above all in the Pope and in the dispositions of the Holy See. That capacity endows us with a God-given standard of right and wrong, of truth and error; and so we can face the most changing circumstances with certainty, confidence and peace. All of this, of course, depends on our faith. But we ought to have this faith; and the defects of men should not take it from us. Speaking of those human defects which necessarily appear in the Church, the author of *Christ is Passing By* says that they do not entitle anyone "to judge the Church in a human fashion, without theological faith, simply letting oneself be impressed by the qualities, or the defects, of certain clerics or certain lay people. That would be an over-superficial judgment. It is not the response of men, but the action of God, that matters in the Church; and

this is what we should try to see. For that is the Church: Christ present among us... We can end up by mistrusting men and each of us is personally obliged to mistrust himself and to add a *mea culpa*, a sincere act of contrition, to the balance sheet of his day. But we have no right to doubt God. And to doubt the Church, to doubt its divine origin or the saving effectiveness of its preaching and its sacraments, is to doubt God himself; it is to refuse to believe fully in the fact of the coming of the Holy Spirit." [13]

## Conscience and authority

The Church is Christ present among us... It is what we said earlier: Christ has not abandoned us. He is present. He continues speaking to us. He continues being our guide. That is why we also said that the guide's voice - in which we can and should place absolute trust - does not speak to us from within, but from without: Christ speaking to us in the teaching of his Church. This brings us to an important point which needs to be clearly grasped. It is commonplace to draw a vivid contrast between conscience and authority, to present them as so irreconcilably opposed that if conscience cannot avoid the clutches of authority, if it cannot "liberate" itself, then there is no course open to it but to submit, with all that this implies in terms of humiliation, depersonalization, degradation... Now, if applied to the authority of the Church - understood as the authority of Christ, as the voice of the Good Shepherd - this is false. The teachings of the Church are not *imposed* on us from outside. We *accept* them *freely*. And in accepting them, we *make them ours*. Just as the motorist who reads and follows the road signs does not feel that he is having anything imposed on him. Just the contrary: he was looking for guidance, for *information*. And now he has found it. He takes possession of that information. It is now his. Now he knows which is the right road. And he freely chooses it. It is

the same with us and our conscience. The indications given by the Church - indications guaranteed by Christ - exist outside us. They are objective. But when we listen to them - because we trust them - *we make them ours. We incorporate them into our conscience.* They become part of the elements of judgment which, precisely, go to make up our conscience. It is false therefore, in the case of a Catholic, to oppose personal conscience and Church authority. The authority of the Church - the trust that he possesses in the authority of the Church - is a *part* of his personal conscience... When we apply all of this to the question of freedom, we see that what happens to a person who incorporates Christ's teaching into his conscience, is - paradoxically - just the opposite of what so many people seem to suppose. He feels freer - and not less free - in his very conscience; he feels more secure in his actions. He feels liberated from insecurity and error.

We could sum this up by saying it resolves itself into matters of *trust* and of *competence*. We tend to trust competent people. We put our trust in persons whom we believe to *know* what they are speaking about and what they practise. We trust a competent doctor when he advises us about our health, or a Nobel Prize winner in Physics when he speaks about his specialty. Likewise, we trust the magisterium and we trust the Pope - when they speak to us about God and the way of salvation - because we believe that they are competent precisely in these fields. They have a competence which comes to them from God. Their competence is divine. And our trust in them should therefore know no limits.

## **Believing joyfully**

To doubt the Church would mean to doubt God. Similarly, to believe in the Church is to believe in God. And

how does a Christian believe in God. Freely, and *joyfully*. Joyfully, because he knows God loves us and that when he speaks and guides us, we can be sure - *absolutely* sure - that he is leading us forward towards happiness. So it is then, with that same joy and for these same reasons, that we should believe in the Church and follow her teachings. It is worth repeating what we said at the beginning: the Christian way is not always easy, but it is a *clear* way, and we *know* that it leads to heaven. If one meets disgruntled Christians today who seem ready to protest about everything, could this not be because they are thinking too much about the demands or the difficulties of Christian living, and not enough about the clearness and sureness of the way and, above all, about *where* it is going?

## NOTES

[1] At times the authority of Vatican II, or rather of 'conciliar trends' is invoked to justify this politicization of religion, whereas the fact of the matter is that it is in flattest contradiction with the teaching of the Council: "Christ gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one": *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 42.

[2] Cf. Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 16.

[3] While some people have a keen sense of geographical direction, many others are chronic "drifters" or "strayers" who seem as if they just can't help getting lost. What a tremendous number of people in our modern world are morally astray, wandering without the slightest sense of direction, among the highways and byways - or deadends - of this world.

[4] Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 22.

[5] The term 'magisterium' covers both the mission and the power to teach which the Church received from our Lord (Mt 28:18-20), and the whole of the saving doctrine which she presents to men in the fulfillment of this mission.

[6] Cf. Vatican II, *Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life*, n. 15.

[7] "The one source from which heresies have arisen and schisms been born, is the failure to obey God's Pontiff, the resistance to acknowledge, within the Church, one single Pontiff and one single judge who stands in the place of Christ" (St Cyprian, *Epist, XII ad Corn*).

[8] "This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, *even when he is not speaking ex cathedra*. That is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will" (Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 25).

[9] Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 22.

[10] The Third Commandment does not merely require us to talk with God, but to sanctify Sundays and Holy days by sharing in the Sacrifice of Christ.

[11] Cf. J. Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 933.

[12] *Ibid.*, n. 687.

[13] J. Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 131.





## 08. FORMATION OF A FREE CONSCIENCE IN THE CHURCH

I obviously must begin by explaining what I mean by a free conscience. To do so I would recall what conscience is; and (perhaps even more importantly) what it is not.

Conscience is not an autonomous faculty of moral judgment, nor is it a sort of moral yes-man to one's personal whims, compliantly attaching the label 'right' to whatever one feels like doing (as for the label 'wrong', the "whimsy" conscience tends to reserve it in practice for what other people do).

Conscience is that judgment of the mind as to the moral value (the rightness or wrongness) of one's own free actions. One can therefore only speak of conscience if one believes in values, in right and wrong, in personal responsibility, in free choice. And since lots of people don't believe in these things nowadays, the fact is that lots of people today who talk about conscience don't really believe in what they are talking about.

After these preambula, I would express my thesis briefly in the following points:

a) conscience is free *if it is free to fulfil its functions properly*, in other words, if it is free to be an accurate pointer towards right and an accurate protester against wrong. It is not free, therefore, if it is not free from *error*; if, for whatever reason, it points to what is wrong as if it were right; just as a compass is not free if, under the influence of some nearby magnetic field, it points to East of West as if it were North [1]. Again, conscience lacks freedom in the degree to which it is not free from *doubt*. A doubtful

conscience does not feel free. It feels uncertain. A doubtful guide is not a free guide. One does not follow it freely. Further, conscience is not free if like a drugged or anaesthetized nervous system, it has lost its *sensitivity to wrong*.

b) conscience is free - and feels free - in the measure in which it possesses the maximum certainty that it is functioning correctly, that its judgements are right.

c) and conscience can possess such maximum - absolute - certainty only in letting itself be guided by the teaching of the Catholic Church, for only the Church teaches the truth - moral truth as well as dogmatic truth - infallibly. Therefore, the more conscience lets itself be formed by the teaching authority of the Church, the freer it feels, and the freer it is.

## **The Church on the defensive?**

Now, if I am told that modern man regards it as axiomatic that freedom and authority are irreconcilable enemies, and is therefore scarcely well prepared to accept unthinkingly a thesis which makes freedom of conscience depend on submission (as he would say) to authority, I would answer: Good, I am not asking modern man to accept this thesis unthinkingly. But I am asking him to accept it *thinkingly*. For I feel that if modern man will not readily accept the thesis just set forth, it is precisely because he is not thinking. And, since the thesis is true, it is vital to get him to think.

Again if I am told that modern man questions any kind of authority; that, within the Church herself, modern Catholics are anything but unquestioning about Church authority, I would again say: Fine, let's turn all this

questioning to good purpose. Far from hoping for less questioning, let's ask for more. Let modern man indeed question the Church about her authority, her credentials, her warrant for teaching, her claim to be the ally and not the foe of freedom, to be the support and not the oppressor of conscience. But let the questioning not be one-sided. Let the Church not be on the defensive. Let her also question modern man about *his* credentials, *his* certainties, *his* philosophy of freedom and *his* basis for it. And then, perhaps, modern man may begin to question himself, and to think.

Let us direct a little of this questioning towards contemporary man who wants freedom (as I do), but who wants it without authority, who seems to believe that the mind is freer the less it has to accept any absolutes, and the conscience is freer the less it has to look to any given norm of conduct. We are here touching on two related concepts, that have been almost in the nature of battle crises for modern man: freedom of thought and freedom of conscience. Let us examine the first briefly, before passing on to the second which interests us more directly.

## **Freedom of thought**

What does modern man mean when he maintains - as he has been happily maintaining throughout recent centuries - that thought is free, that the mind is free? Is the mind free? Why, yes; up to a point. Is the mind free to think anything, or more specifically to think whatever it likes? Absolutely not; and it would be anything but a sign of freedom if it could think what it liked. It might like, for instance, to think that its owner is capable of floating out of the 10th floor window and wafting safely down to the ground. Or it might like to think that it is actually the mind

of Napoleon Bonaparte recently escaped from exile in Elba...

Such thoughts might be no more than fancy-free day dreaming. But if the mind really began to think these thoughts seriously, such thinking would be the sign of a deranged rather than a free mind. If one wishes, a madman, is the freest of men. He is in no way bound by the laws of logic or truth. But he is only free to think absurd and irresponsible thoughts (within the 'truth' he has invented); and to pay the consequences (and at times these are very costly) of the unreality of his thoughts if he acts upon them...

A mind that falls into error every couple of minutes is hardly a free mind. Who would say that a child's mind is free because it has never been taught that there exist certain laws of mathematics or physics, etc.: that 2 plus 2 add up to 4, or that a live electricity cable can kill, or that it is dangerous to step on thin ice?

We may possess the freedom to think incorrectly or ignorantly, but *we are not freer for so doing*, for we are no longer moving within reality. And freedom that does not move within reality is obviously unreal freedom. All education, after all, is based on the principle that ignorance or error is an enemy of man's development and freedom, and should be dispelled by education or information.

The mind, in short, is made not to think anything, but to think the truth. It doesn't always manage to do so. It is, I repeat, free to fall into error. But it is not freer for falling into error.

And so in moral matters. A man is free to do wrong, but he is not freer for doing it. He is less free still, if he has no means to distinguish wrong from right. And

perhaps he is least free if he has no concern to make this distinction.

## **Freedom of conscience**

Here let us examine the concept of 'freedom of conscience'. If the expressions 'freedom of conscience' or 'free conscience' have any meaning, they cannot possibly mean that man is free to do what he likes. 'To do what one likes' is an aim or an attitude that may possibly be worked into a philosophy of freedom (however poorly understood). But it is one that is absolutely excluded from any serious philosophy of *conscience*, for the most elementary notion of conscience implies a call to do at times what one does not like...

To profess belief in conscience means to profess a belief in some standard of right and wrong. It likewise means to profess a belief in freedom, in one's capacity to choose according to conscience (which is to do right) or, in the same instance, to choose against conscience (which is to do wrong).

So a man is free to act against conscience, but he is not freer for so doing, nor does he feel freer in his conscience if he acts against it. His conscience does not feel free, it feels violated. Conscience is not free if its rights are not respected. We hear so much today of the rights of conscience. But perhaps we hear very little of the most important of these rights, which is the right of conscience to be obeyed; i.e. to be obeyed by the person whom it speaks to from within, to be obeyed by its own owner [2]. And the greatest violation of the rights of conscience occurs when it is not so obeyed.

The most important threat, therefore, to the freedom of one's conscience comes not from outside but from within. A first condition for having and maintaining a free conscience is to obey it. The refusal to obey one's conscience threatens its freedom, and then the only way to overcome and remove the threat is to acknowledge the deviation and to rectify one's course. Otherwise insincerity will begin to take over, a man will try to ignore what his conscience tells him is right, he will try to warp its voice or force its judgment in another direction. And he may succeed in his attempts: subjecting his conscience to his whims, passions or prejudices. A conscience so subjected is no longer a free conscience. It is inoperative and enslaved [3].

## **Two conditions of a free conscience**

In any case, a moment's reflection makes it clear that 'to do what one likes' is no adequate formula for real happiness, for fulfilment or for freedom itself. Unthinking happiness is not real happiness and is certainly not likely to be either deep or lasting. Man - thinking man - is happy (and therefore feels free) not when he does what he likes, but when he *knows* that what he does is *right*; i.e.

a) when he knows that he is following his conscience; and

b) when he knows that his conscience itself is correct;

I would suggest that these are the two conditions of a free conscience. Sincerity - listening to and following one's conscience - is the first condition. And it is a vital condition of a man who wishes to have any claim to possessing a free conscience. But some comment must be

made about sincerity. In the first place, sincerity is not an easy virtue [4].

In the second place, sincerity - however important - is not enough. It is not enough because, after all, it is not difficult for a sincere man to know whether he is acting according to his conscience or not. He knows he is following his conscience when his will chooses what his mind tells him is right. And he knows he is disobeying his conscience when his will chooses what his mind judges to be wrong. The difficulty for a sincere man does not lie in knowing whether his will is acting in accordance with his mind, or not. The difficulty lies in knowing *whether his mind is thinking in accordance with the truth or not...*

## **Following one's nose?**

It is not enough, though it is essential, to follow one's conscience. To follow one's conscience may be the moral equivalent to following one's nose. It is easy enough to be sure one is following one's nose. It is not so easy to be sure that one's nose is going in the right direction. And this is really the heart of the matter.

After all, when a man is at the crossroads of choice and the mind tells the will, 'My reading of the signposts is that, if we want to get to our destination, we've got to take the road to the right', there is little difficulty in knowing whether the will is prepared to follow the mind's reading of the signposts. There may be some difficulty in knowing whether the mind has read the signposts correctly; but that can probably be checked without outside consultation. The real difficulty lies in knowing *whether or not the signposts are correct* [5], whether one has cause to trust them or not; and this depends on one's trust in who posted them, and

one's confidence that they have not since been moved or altered.

So, the big question with conscience is: can we trust it only as we trust our nose, or can we trust it more? How can we be sure it is pointing in the right direction? This brings us to the all-important question of the *reference points* of conscience. For conscience - *if it is to have any value at all* - must relate to something fixed and outside itself. Some people today would deny this, but I think their position can be shown to be untenable.

A man only refers to his conscience just as he only refers to a compass because he has a goal, because he knows he may miss it and he wants to get there. And he consults his compass or his conscience because this enables him to relate the steps he is contemplating to certain fixed external points or standards: North and South, Right and wrong.

A compass is of use because it relates to an external fixed point. An albatross - or a vision of angels - flying round a boat is of no more use to a sailor in planning his course, than are the longings of his heart to reach port. He needs to be able to steer by something fixed.

Similarly one can *guide* oneself by one's conscience only insofar as one's conscience relates to some external fixed standard. A conscience that relates to nothing external or fixed is utterly useless as a guide. No man, in his right senses, would consult it. Why should he? The only sensible thing to do with such a conscience is to throw it out the window, or to stop calling it conscience - just as one would throw away a compass whose needle automatically pointed to the traveller's heart. Of what use is it to a man lost in a desert to be told where his feelings are, or where his heart



is, or his brain or some other organ. What he wants to know is where is the nearest oasis. And if he has a hunch that the nearest oasis is to the South, he needs to know where North is. He needs reference points. Otherwise he is just going to wander round in circles until his heart and brain dry up and the whole of him parches to death.

A compass whose needle points this way and then that, or goes racing round in circles, is a compass gone mad. The explanation of such compass craziness is no doubt that it is under influences - one or several magnetic fields - that make it incapable of relating any longer to true magnetic north. But one thing is certain: as long as its needle keeps spinning round and pointing to the nearest field of attraction, it is utterly useless as a compass. And so with conscience. A conscience that points to nowhere or to anywhere, or to some constantly shifting point (like public opinion), is no system to be guided by [6].

## **Trusting Magnetic North**

We are now fully at grips with the kernel of our problem, which is the inter-relationship of three elements: conscience, freedom, and an external fixed norm of right and wrong. From what we have said one thing should already be clear: that the widespread modern notion that conscience is freer when it accepts no external objective moral standard, and conversely that its freedom is restricted in the measure in which it 'submits' to such standards, is simply a *prejudice*. It is not a properly reasoned judgment, and does not stand up to any test of reason. It is false. It enunciates the opposite of the truth.

Bet us take the case of the man who relates his conscience to no external and objective standards of right and wrong. Such a man, far from being guided by a free

conscience, is not being guided by his conscience at all. He just does not know what conscience is. He has either:

a) forgotten the *ideas* of right and wrong completely, and is simply being guided in his choices by his moods, preferences, passions or convenience. Such a man--and he is frequently found today - is not really being guided by his conscience, but by his *feelings*; or

b) set up his own mind as the standard--the very origin--of moral truth. He regards what he calls his 'conscience' not just as a pointer to right and wrong, but as their originator, which is like regarding a compass as the creator of Magnetic North. Such a man - and he too abounds today - is not really being guided by his conscience, but by his *pride*.

If a man constitutes his own self not only as his compass and guide, but as his very North and destiny, he may still claim to be free. But he is only free to travel in egocentric and ever-narrowing circles round and round himself. His situation is actually much graver than that. The man who treats his conscience as if it were, for him, the ultimate source of right and wrong, looks on his conscience as the supreme value in his life. He looks up to nothing higher. This is idolatry, for it is to worship, as supreme, something other than God. It is the worst form of idolatry, for it is self-idolatry: the worship of self or a part of self as one's highest value.

Now let us take the case of the man who does genuinely try to relate his conscience to some external given code of conduct. In his case we can say that his conscience is free, and feels free, in the degree to which he believes that code or norm of authority to be trustworthy, to merit confidence.

It is not enough for a man to be able to trust his compass, to feel sure it is free from other magnetic influences and is really pointing to Magnetic North. *He has to trust Magnetic North!* And he has to trust it to be fixed and immovable. If he couldn't - if he felt his compass were pointing to an ever shifting object - then he would have nothing really to guide himself by, and could only feel free to drift, not to *go somewhere*.

Magnetic North merits confidence. A man feels that it is part of the natural order of things; that it has been checked and relied on by navigators throughout the ages and has not been found shifting [7]. And so the modern sailor or pilot trusts it.

Most of us are not sailors or pilots. We are probably no more than just ordinary motor-car drivers. So much the better, to illustrate our purpose. When do we feel freest in travelling? When we have left our road-maps at home? When the sign-posts have been blown down by a storm? Just the contrary. We *want* maps. We *need* road-signs. We feel lost without them. We feel freer for having them and following them. This means that maps merit confidence, in our estimation, and the more they merit our confidence, the more readily and freely we follow them.

But road signs are not exactly like Magnetic North. They are not part of the natural order. They have been placed there by other men. So, in trusting the signs, we are really placing our trust in others. We believe that the Local Authorities or the Automobile Association are not deceiving us and have signposted the roads accurately. We also believe - or trust that no one has shifted the signs. It is a further act of faith.

This underlines one of the many truths of life so often forgotten nowadays: that freedom is in function of trust. Freedom at the crossroads is useless unless we know which road to choose. And we cannot know this of ourselves. We have to look for outside guidance. We have to trust something or someone. If we can, we feel free. If we cannot, we feel blind. Freedom, we repeat, is in function of trust.

## **Big Ben**

And so it is with conscience. It is not intelligent (nor is it safe) for a man to check his actions against his conscience unless he can check his conscience against something truer than itself. After all, we acknowledge the force of conscience - its authority - when we sincerely try to adjust our actions to fit its indications (and the more this adjustment goes against the grain, the more we show our sincerity) [8]. But we also acknowledge the weakness of conscience - its fallibility the possibility that it is guiding us mistakenly - when we sincerely try to adjust conscience itself to some higher and more trustworthy norm of conduct (and the more *this* adjustment goes against the grain, the more we show our sincerity).

What is that higher norm which by we should guide and form our conscience. What is that 'truer' Truth to which we should adapt it? The sincere man - who takes conscience seriously - will be anguished to the extent to which he cannot *check* his conscience against something truer than itself.

A man to whom it is important to be punctual in his appointments, checks and adjusts his watch regularly for he realizes that it is not infallible, that even the best watch in the world can tell him the wrong time. But he doesn't just

shake it to see if it is still ticking. He checks it against some timepiece in which he has greater confidence.

Each one is obviously entitled to his preference in this question of time standards. Personally I confess to my own naive belief in the quasi-infallibility of Big Ben (and I also confess to a certain irritation when I hear Greenwich Time described as 'Mean' when seldom if ever has such a reliable British commodity been broadcast so generously to the entire world...).

Well then; who - or what - will play Big Ben to my conscience? *That* is the question that the thinking man needs to answer.

The non-Catholic has no real answer. He does well indeed to listen to his conscience. He does well to shake it - or better still to shake himself - to ensure that it is still in working order. But when he asks himself if it is *accurate*, if it is a guide to be guided by, he really has no answer to give, for he knows nothing more trustworthy to check its accuracy against.

Who will act Big Ben to my conscience? The answer, for the Catholic, is clear. Who? Why, the Church's Magisterium: the constant and authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church! This is the unfailing norm of moral accuracy, the standard against which I need to check and adjust my own conscience if I wish it to be a trustworthy guide, one to be guided by in all freedom.

Now, despite all that has been said so far, it is probable that some people will still baulk at the idea that the Church's Magisterium can be the support and not the mortal enemy of moral freedom. The idea is just too much for them to swallow. What more can we say to convince

them that the idea is true and that the swallowing should reasonably be done? [9]

## **A fail-safe mind?**

Let us take up again the point of certainty. It is only natural to want to be sure about the consequences of a decision before taking it. People seldom *prefer* taking decisions in the dark. It is true that at times they may have no alternative. All they can then do is to act blindly and hope for the best. But since history teaches that people hoping blindly for the best have often run right smack into the worst, the average man in any matter where he stands to lose or gain--tries to figure out as accurately as he can what are the likely consequences of his decisions.

Modern technology has made it possible for men to extend the area of their certainties, to cut down the risks of miscalculated decisions. It has provided them with machines capable of almost fail-safe calculations, however complicated these may be. The business magnate relies on the company computer, and the schoolboy on his mini-calculator, to relieve them of complicated thought processes. Their trust in this computerised information is well-nigh total, and they gladly appropriate it, integrating it readily into their own minds and willingly making it their own.

If only such short-cutting thought processes could be applied, not just to business or mathematical operations, but to personal moral decisions! If only one could acquire a computer-like mind - thoroughly fail-safe and incapable of error!...

One such mind - and one only - has existed in the course of human history: the mind of Jesus Christ. And

Christ has left that mind to his Church: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28: 19-20); 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you, rejects me' (Lk 10:16).

Therefore, when we think in accordance with the Church's mind, on points of faith, and act in accordance with the Church's mind, on points of moral conduct, we are following the mind of Christ. And Christ's mind is fail-safe.

In other words, when the Church has signposted the roads, there can be no mistaking the roads; there is no room for doubt or uncertainty, for it is Christ, through his Church, who places and protects the signposts. "If we are deceived, Lord", says St Augustine, referring to the Church's teaching, "it is by you that we are deceived. As the Founder of Opus Dei writes, We can have our doubts about men. But we have no right to doubt God. And to doubt the Church, to doubt its divine origin or the saving effectiveness of its preaching, is to doubt God himself" [10]. We have no right and no reason to doubt God; and every right and reason to trust him. Hesitation and lostness if we doubt him. Certainty and freedom if we trust him [11].

## **Mental immaturity?**

Now I know that some people maintain that the longing for moral certainty is a sign of mental immaturity [12], and they suggest it is comparable precisely to the longing for political or social security which can make a people sell their freedom to a totalitarian system. Their comment on my line of argument might well be that there is little difference between looking for a Big Ben to rule over

one's conscience and looking for a Big Brother to rule over one's entire social and political life.

The objection is easily rebutted, for the analogy simply does not hold. There is no parallel between that fear of personal decision-taking which makes a man prefer to have someone else decide for him, and the determination to take one's own decisions - but not to take them in the dark. There is no parallel between the preference for being told what one must do rather than having to think for oneself, and the determination to be guided by one's own conscience - but not by an unreliable conscience.

There is no parallel between switching off one's mind and letting oneself be brainwashed by a political ideology, and turning on one's mind so as to find the sources of truth that alone can satisfy one's mental hunger and thirst. To close one's eyes, disconnect one's mind, and accept a life-dominating ideology (especially such intellectually impoverished ideologies as humanism, communion and other forms of immanentism), under the pressure of public opinion or political propaganda, or simply motivated by a desire for unthinking security or drawn by the attractions of the apparently easy road, is indeed intellectually and humanly degrading. But there is no degradation in opening one's mind to the divine warranty behind a series of truths which are bound up with the highest human and supernatural ideals, especially when to accept them means to steel one's will to a constant uphill struggle against personal laziness, greed, sensuality, selfishness and conformism.

## **Those who don't prefer freedom**

If the mind looks for mental certainty, it is absurd to suggest that the conscience (which is simply a function of



the mind) does not look for moral certainty. The mind, like the conscience, is made for certainty. It doesn't always find it. Whatever it experiences, when it doesn't find it, is not freedom.

No one in his right senses thinks he is freer at a cross-roads because the roads are undetermined; because they go nowhere or because he doesn't know where they go... If a man at the cross-roads of moral choice 'thinks' that he can be free only as long as he doesn't know where the roads go, as long as he is not told where his choices may lead him, he is not in his right senses. He is not really thinking; he is simply preferring. He is preferring uncertainty to certainty, which is equivalent to preferring darkness - or at least mistiness - to light. One is free to prefer certain things to others, but certain preferences are not a choice for freedom nor do they show a love for freedom. One is free to prefer to stumble in the dark rather than open one's eyes to the light; one is free to be uncertain - though the grounds for certainty exist; one is free to prefer not to read the signposts - though the signposts are prominent and clear; or to prefer not to trust them - though they have been divinely guaranteed. A man, if he chooses, is entitled to such peculiar preferences. What he is not entitled to, if he makes them, is to be regarded as a freedom-loving person; nor even as a very free person. He shows every sign of being a very lost person, and may end up losing the very freedom he boasts of but uses so peculiarly. Every free choice is indeed a *sign of* freedom. But, to recall a point we have made at greater length earlier [13], not every free choice is a *choice for* freedom. Some free choices are choices for slavery (the free decision to read pornography, to take drugs, etc.). Some people prefer communism to democracy. They may be made more secure (too secure)? by their preference; they are certainly not made freer.

## Intellectual surrender?

There, then, is our thesis. Conscience is a guide, no more. And it is not an infallible guide. It is not failsafe, nor is it self-correcting or self-adjusting. If it is to be free to fulfil its function properly, and if we in consequence are to feel free in following it, it must relate itself accurately to some infallible norm; it must form and inform itself according to some absolute and unfailing standard of truth - which is (and can only be) the mind of Christ speaking through his Church.

Let us make a final point on this, in case it is not yet clear from all that has gone before. I am not being asked to make an intellectual surrender, in accepting the truth of Christ as it comes to me through the Church. Nor, I repeat, am I being asked to relinquish my intellectual freedom, so as to gain moral security. It is a victory for the intellect, not a surrender, when it discovers and embraces the truth. And it is the highest (and the only intelligent) exercise of human freedom to embrace that truth once discovered. That much should be clear. But there is more to be said.

Let us try to understand the greatness of God's purpose in leaving the mind of his Son to his Church, and the dignity he bestows on us in making that mind available to us. *Available to us!* - that is the key idea. Christ's mind is available to me, if I choose to avail myself of it. So it is not a question of renouncing my own mind so as to take up, in its stead, the mind of Christ (though that would, in itself, be no bad exchange!) It is a question of *enriching* my own mind with the mind of Christ. He offers me his mind so that, if I wish, I can *make it my own*: so that the inexhaustible treasures of truth, certainty and freedom of his mind can become part of the endowment of my own mind.

Let us recall again the examples suggested earlier: the computerised information, the travel guide's advice.,. When I freely and reasonably accept this 'outside' information, it becomes mine. It becomes part of me. The outside information becomes inside information, because I have freely welcomed it and taken it in. My scope of knowledge has therefore been enlarged. My mind is better equipped. It is more informed, and I act upon it more confidently and more freely

I obviously do not give up thinking for myself when I trust the travel guide. I do not practise intellectual castration nor do I paralyse my own power of decision when I accept the computerised information. I rather make all that information mine, and my mind develops and strengthens as that outside information enters into it. The effect of this newly acquired knowledge is to allow for more accurate thinking on the part of my mind, and for more confident - freer - deciding on the part of my will. Its effect is that some possible mistakes have surely been eliminated; some greater truth has surely been guaranteed; some greater sense of freedom can surely be enjoyed. So at least I trust.

If only *all* the mistakes - in thinking, in signposting, in wondering about the moral roads, in deciding between them - could be eliminated... *They can!* And what a new dimension of freedom is then achieved.

This is how we should regard the gift of Christ's mind as it speaks to us through his Church. Outside information? No doubt. But it becomes inside information as soon as I accept it. It becomes mine - part of my mind. Moreover, I have every grounds for accepting it. And every grounds for feeling free as I act on it. For the mind of Christ thinks no error; nothing but the truth. And the truth -

knowledge of the truth - remains the clear condition of freedom. This is our final conclusion. It was in any case a foregone conclusion, because he himself told us so, from the start: 'You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32).

\* \* \*

I would add two Postscripts:

a) these considerations are intended for those to whom freedom means something: means the power to choose, combined with the persuasion that choices matter. The man for whom choices don't really matter is scarcely interested in freedom. Going where one wants, and not caring where one is going, are two totally different things. The former poses a problem in the exercise of one's freedom; the latter does not. People with a goal ought to think; and generally want to. Drifters neither think nor want to;

b) at the bottom of all possible debates on this subject lies the real question of whether one *wants* guidance or not. For the man who does not, the guidance of the Church will always be an irritant. If, moreover, he is in the absurd position of calling himself a Catholic - i.e. of being within the Church but resenting the guidance of the Church - then he has only two ways of resolving his self-created frustrations. He can either leave the Church - which, God help him, he is free to do. Or else he can learn to want that guidance - which he is also free to do, though he will only do it freely after thinking a lot more clearly and a lot more deeply. These notes may, please God, help him.

NOTES

[1] That a compass be attracted by North is not a limitation of its freedom, but rather a *condition* of its freedom to continue being a compass. Similarly, that conscience be attracted by the truth by a true standard of right and wrong - is not a limitation but a condition of its freedom as conscience.

[2] This, in itself, implies that conscience has authority over its owner; that it in some way stands above him, that it represents some higher power or Author. It will be remembered that, for Cardinal Newman, this was one of the most convincing proofs of the existence of God.

[3] Man therefore, if he is to be truly human and truly free, must not subject his conscience to what he 'feels like doing', but must submit what he feels like doing to his conscience.

[4] Many moralists today have no time for objective criteria in morality. All they ask for is subjective sincerity; each one is entitled to 'do his own thing' as long as he sincerely believes in it... Further moralizing would seem unnecessary (and indeed illogical and impossible) once one has accepted this principle. Yet these moral philosophizers do continue to moralize with the particularity that their further moralizing would seem to be based on the firm assumption that the great majority of people are generally quite sincere.

However attractive this philosophy may appear to the superficial, it is surprising that seemingly intelligent people hold it and fail to realize that each man doing his own thing--each man a law to himself is a sure formula for moral, human and social chaos (what would happen on our roads, if the rule of good driving were that each driver should 'do his own thing'?).

Those who are not capable of foreseeing the consequences of such a system could at least be more careful about its assumptions. To assume that almost everyone is always and everywhere sincere is no small assumption. It is justifiable? Is the majority of mankind sincere - in the precise sense that these moralists assume? Do people in general believe sincerely in 'their own thing'? One wonders. They may well believe that their own thing is smart or pleasant or highly profitable and well worth doing. But the only question morality is interested in is whether they believe it is right. Do the vast majority of people believe sincerely that their own thing is right? I don't know. I can't say. I am inclined to doubt it. I certainly would not easily assume it.

This easy assumption of sincerity would seem to rest upon another assumption: that sincerity itself is an easy virtue. Now about this assumption I have no doubt whatsoever. It is completely mistaken. For sincerity - at least in its full implications and consequences; i.e. sincerity lived out to the full - is at times a most difficult virtue, for the simple reason that to listen sincerely to one's conscience often calls for conduct that goes very much against one's natural inclinations.

[5] It is not enough to have just a subjective certainty: 'I am sure I have read the signposts correctly'. To be able to travel with a full sense of freedom, a man also and particularly needs an objective certainty: 'I am sure the signposts are correct'. In other words, the mere ability to choose does not necessarily give a sense of freedom in choosing. A man feels freest, not when he is offered the maximum choice, but when he has the maximum certainty (or guarantee) that what he chooses is right, is worthwhile. A man doesn't feel free at a crossroads just because he has

5 or 50 roads open before him. He feels free when he knows which road to choose.

I have known people who, as regards material goods, were literally in a position to choose anything; and simply didn't know what to choose. A man in the middle of a desert is free to travel in any direction. But that is anything but an advantage if he doesn't know which direction to travel in.

That is why I would emphasize that conscience is freest, not when it thinks it can choose anything (i.e. that it is a matter of indifference what it chooses) and no conscience really *thinks* that - but when it knows that what it chooses is right.

[6] The terms 'free conscience' and 'independent conscience' are therefore not interchangeable. A 'free conscience' is a meaningful concept, as I am seeking to clarify. An 'independent conscience' - in the sense of a conscience unrelated to (or not conditioned by) any external objective standards of conduct - is an absurdity, for the reason given, i.e. that it is utterly untrustworthy in its essential function, which is that of being a guide.

[7] An encyclopedic friend, on reading this, dismayed me with the information that Magnetic North does actually shift, however slightly. A little reflection dispelled the dismay, nevertheless. If Magnetic North is unquestioningly relied on, despite this minimal error, how much more unquestioning should our trust be in that Standard which we know to be absolutely free from any error however minimal.

[8] The height of insincerity is evidently the endeavour to adjust conscience so as to fit one's actions. It is hard to avoid the impression that some people today are heartily engaged in this endeavour.

[9] 'Digest' would be a better work than 'swallow'. One swallows prejudices - without digesting them, for they are indigestible. They resist, or at least resent, analysis; and if they are in fact broken down by reason, one finds there is nothing in them. It is on ideas, not on prejudices, that the mind needs to be fed. The mind will digest ideas; that is what it is made for. And, in the measure of the truth of these ideas, it will assimilate and be nourished by them. Some ideas - some truths - may be *unpalatable* to the mind or, more likely, to the will or the passions; but they can be digested. And they are often the very ideas that nourish most. Prejudices, on the contrary, can be palatable enough; and so are easily swallowed. But they are never digested. They may nourish passion or selfishness, but not the mind, for they are not proper food for the mind. They rather tend to poison it.

[10] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 131.

[11] It is important to realize that the sense of freedom in travelling comes more from the degree of certainty that one is on the right road, than from the degree of understanding of why exactly it is right; more from one's confidence in the clear-sightedness of the Guide one is following than from one's own ability to see as far as He does.

[12] Others would say that this desire for moral certainty is a sign of sanctimoniousness. They fail utterly to realize that there is an abyss of difference between a longing for a sense of moral certainty about the possible consequences of one's decisions, and a longing for a sense of moral righteousness about the merit of one's actions. Certainty about which is the right road does not always bring the conviction that one is travelling that road well, or that one has never stumbled on it or departed from it. Rather the contrary: the man who is certain about the right road - the



road revealed by Christ - will be certain that his performance in travelling that road is seldom if ever up to scratch. But at least he knows where he wants to go and where Christ wants him to go - even though he goes there badly.

[13] Chapter 4.