On Conscience

by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

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While Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he wrote two essays on conscience which he delivered to bishops at the Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Research and Education Center (now the National Catholic Bioethics Center) in 1991 and 1984. These essays, titled "Conscience and Truth," and "Bishops, Theologians, and Morality," are gathered into this small work and offer a theological evaluation of the concept of conscience. The work also contains a helpful forward by Dr. John M. Haas, the current president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, which attempts to situate Ratzinger's thought on conscience in its historical setting.

In "Conscience and Truth," Ratzinger notes that some contemporary Catholic moral theologians have opposed the concept of conscience to the concept of authority. For these theologians, the concept of conscience has become representative of freedom, while the concept of authority is representative of a violation of one's freedom (12). Conscience becomes the only norm for the individual and a fortress that must repel the attacks of all external authorities, including the Church's Magisterium.

Ratzinger illustrates the fundamental problem in this understanding of conscience by recalling a discussion with a colleague on the notion of an erroneous conscience that occurred early in his career. It should be recalled that an erroneous conscience is a conscience which incorrectly deduces a course of action from false principles. His colleague had argued that one should be grateful to God for permitting so many unbelievers to remain in good conscience, for if the unbelievers became believers, they would be burdened by the moral obligations of their newfound faith. Instead it is better, his colleague argued, to leave unbelievers in happy ignorance, so that they can continue on their chosen path in good conscience and thereby reach sal-

vation. Ratzinger then recounts a later conversation in which another one of his colleagues brought this theory to its logical conclusion. If an erroneous conscience makes one just before God, then one must admit that we should expect to see the Nazi SS in heaven, "since they carried out all their atrocities with fanatic conviction and complete certainty of conscience" (17).

For Ratzinger there are two notable theological problems with such a view. First, if this understanding of conscience is true, then the gift of faith is a burden since it imposes on the believer virtually impossible demands and is therefore actually an obstacle to salvation. Second, the sacred Scriptures never assert anything similar to a "theory of salvation through ignorance" (20). Nor do the sacred Scriptures ever suggest that conscience has the power to justify the sinner before God. In fact, the Scriptures assert precisely the opposite. St. Paul is clear that pagans, even without the law, knew well what God expected of them (Rom 2:1–16). When one fails to do that which is expected of him, he incurs guilt. Ratzinger concludes,

Man can see the truth of God from the fact of his creaturehood. Not to see it is guilt. It is not seen because man does not want to see it. The "no" of the will which hinders recognition is guilt. The fact that the signal lamp does not shine is the consequence of a deliberate looking away from that which one does not wish to see. (20)

Ratzinger finds in Cardinal Newman's work a way to reconcile the seemingly opposed concepts of conscience and authority. Newman's famous words "I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards" are often cited by those who wish to oppose conscience to authority (23). Newman's point, however, was not to set conscience in opposition to authority but rather to show that the authority of the papacy is

correctly conceived only when viewed together with the primacy of conscience, that is, “a papacy not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it” (23). This is possible because the pope presents and defends the truth. As Ratzinger writes,

One can comprehend the primacy of the pope and its correlation to Christian conscience only in this connection. The true sense of the teaching authority of the pope consists in his being the advocate of Christian memory. The pope does not impose from without. Rather, he elucidates the Christian memory and defends it. For this reason the toast to conscience indeed must precede the toast to the pope, because without conscience there would not be a papacy. All power that the papacy has is power of conscience. It is service to the double memory on which the faith is based—and which again and again must be purified, expanded, and defended against the destruction of memory that is threatened by a subjectivity forgetful of its own foundation, as well as by the pressures of social and cultural conformity. (36)

Finally, Ratzinger concludes this essay by returning to the relationship of conscience to grace. In the first part of the essay, Ratzinger had rejected the justifying power of conscience. What Ratzinger is pointing to is that conscience, whether properly informed or invincibly ignorant, does not have the power to convey sanctifying grace and place one in a relationship of friendship with God. Instead, conscience makes us aware of our guilt and causes distress. As such, conscience points the way to the Logos, who “is the truth in person” (40) and the true origin of our justification. It is the Logos who offers us relief from the burdens of our conscience.

In the second essay, “Bishops, Theologians, and Morality,” Ratzinger examines the relationship between bishops and theologians with particular attention to the notion of conscience. Ratzinger asserts that conscience “is an organ, not an oracle.... Because

it is an organ, it requires growth, training and practice” (61), otherwise it can become so deformed that it can no longer properly discern what constitutes the good. The Church through her bishops has the responsibility to form consciences correctly by bearing “witness” to the *mores* (a Latin term signifying not only the moral law but also the customs of a given community). The theologian has the same starting point as the bishop with respect to the *mores* of the Church in so far as both must receive them and be in communion with the Church. For Ratzinger, theologians assist the Magisterium by seeking the *ratio fidei* and “noticing new questions, gathering knowledge of their objective content and preparing answers” (74). Finally, Ratzinger notes that criticism of the Magisterium by theologians is sometimes beneficial “when it fills in a lack of information, clarifies shortcomings of the linguistic or conceptual presentation, and at the same time deepens the insight into the limits and range of the particular teaching” (75).

If a criticism can be leveled at this small work, it would only be that the National Catholic Bioethics Center should have included other works by Joseph Ratzinger related to the issue of conscience in order to give a more theologically integrated presentation. In 1972, for example, Ratzinger gave an instructive lecture titled “Conscience in Its Age,” in which he discusses how the annihilation of conscience is the precondition for totalitarian domination. This essay helps to show the real consequence of repudiating conscience.

While Ratzinger’s short text can at times be demanding, it is worth the reader’s effort. The first essay in particular offers a careful theological assessment of contemporary Catholic moral theology on conscience. The National Catholic Bioethics Center’s edition of Ratzinger’s essays offers insight into the thought of the man who became Pope Benedict XVI, in addition to a well-reasoned presentation on the issue of conscience. The National Catholic Bioethics Center’s edition is a welcome contribution.

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