

### St John Henry Newman: the dignity of conscience

Last month we spoke about newly-canonised St John Henry Newman. It's interesting to find from the index of the Legion *Handbook* that of all people apart from Our Lord and Our Lady, and leaving aside quotes from Scripture or the Magisterium, Newman is second only to St Louis de Montfort in the number of mentions he receives. Today we look at his influential teachings on conscience.

The Second Vatican Council proclaimed, 'Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment ... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God ... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.' (*Gaudium et spes* 16)

It is by conscience that we judge the goodness or evil of an action (whether one we're only considering as a possibility, or one we've already performed). In the case of actions already performed, if we've acted in accord with what our conscience judged at the time to be good, our conscience will be at peace. If we've acted against that judgement, we experience a 'guilty conscience'.

Now, it can happen that conscience makes mistakes, so that an action that is actually wrong according to God's law is considered right, or vice versa. Yet, we still have to follow whatever our conscience certainly tells us, even if (quite unknown to us) it is in error. (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-IIae, 19, 5; *Rom* 14:23; *James* 4:17) When we follow what our conscience presents to us as certainly good, then from our point of view, we are following the truth, and God commends us for doing it – even if it later turns out that we were mistaken, and the action was really *against* the truth of God's law. (Such actions remain harmful and disordered, but we are not to blame.)

Sometimes people call this the 'primacy of conscience', but it sheds light to call it also the 'primacy of truth'. St John Paul II taught: 'It is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives' (*Veritatis Splendor* ('The Splendour of Truth') 63). In the case of the correct conscience, he explained, it is a question of the *actual truth* recognised by us; in the case of the mistaken conscience, it is a question of what we, in our own minds, *incorrectly consider* to be true.

It follows that genuine conscience seeks out the actual truth of right and wrong, the actual truth of what God's law really is. This is called 'forming our conscience'. Vatican II taught that, 'In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth.' (Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae* 14)

If we fail to seek moral truth, if we have no interest in it, then it's not really 'conscience' we're talking about anymore, but more probably 'doing whatever we feel like'. Laziness in seeking truth, or habits of sin that dull our moral instincts, mean that errors of conscience can sometimes themselves be blameworthy in their root.

So St John Paul warned, 'Before feeling easily justified in the name of our conscience, we should reflect on the words of the Psalm: "Who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (Ps 19:12). There are faults which we fail to see but which nevertheless remain faults, because we have refused to walk towards the light (cf. Jn 9:39-41).' (*Veritatis Splendor* 63)

St John Henry Newman is rightly known as a defender of the dignity of conscience. Following the definition of the dogma of papal infallibility by the First Vatican Council in 1870, he was explaining the dogma and its quite limited scope in his 1875 book, *A Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*. (This was against the exaggerated interpretations of non-Catholic critics, which claimed almost that virtually every word of the pope was now supposed to be treated as infallible by Catholics.) Like a number of bishops, Newman had not thought it an opportune moment for the Council to define the dogma, but he firmly upheld the teaching itself.

It is here that we also find his central teachings about conscience. As he explained, conscience and Church authority actually go hand in hand. We only obey Church authority in the first place because conscience tells us this is the right thing (since the Church is established and guaranteed by God). Therefore, the Church really *depends* on conscience. So he made his famous quip, 'Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink – to the Pope, if you please, – still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.' (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* 5)

When there is an apparent conflict between conscience and a command of Church authority, Newman explained: '[The onus of proof lies] on the side of conscience. Unless a man is able to say to himself, as in the Presence of God, that he must not, and dare not, act upon the Papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin in disobeying it ... If this necessary rule were observed, collisions between the Pope's authority and the authority of conscience would be very rare.' (*Letter* 5)

And Newman warned of the widespread counterfeit of self-will that people substitute for genuine conscience. He wrote: 'When men [wrong-headedly] advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all ... Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations ... Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century [the 19<sup>th</sup> century] it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will.' (*Letter* 5)

So Newman would totally reject the idea that if the Church says one thing but I feel like thinking or doing another thing, then a simple appeal to the 'primacy of conscience' supposedly justifies me in thinking or doing whatever I please. True, the Church won't force me to obey. But I will one day have to explain my choice in the presence of God, the Supreme Truth.