2024

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol17/iss1/26.

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Conscience in the Catholic Church

By Hang Geum Augustine, OSB

INTRODUCTION
We have chances to examine ourselves with our conscience whenever we attend masses. Monks and nuns in Benedictine monasteries examine twice a day; at the beginning of mass and compline. Due to the notion of ‘sin’ during this examination, it is understandable that most of us use just this time as personal examination of what one did wrong. The stereotype on
conscience in Catholic context attribute partially to these examinations. Majorie Thompson distinguished the examination of conscience from that of ‘consciousness.’ She explains, “[examination of conscience] is explicitly penitential practice that helps us name and acknowledge our weaknesses.” This paper is just focusing on ‘conscience’ in the context of self-examination above and the other contexts which are not related to consciousness.

THE TIME OF JESUS CHRIST/PATRISTICS

The Apostle Paul is regarded the first church father to deal with conscience in the context of Christian faith. In Eastern Orthodox churches and early medieval times, Bosman (2012) picked Paul, saying, “Paul was probably acquainted with the Stoic conception of conscience, as well as Clement of Alexandria, who declared that conscience is capable in the utmost degree of carefully choosing what must be chosen and avoiding what must be avoided.” Cornelius William Williams O.P. from University of Fribourg, Switzerland and Aaron Converse from Fordham, New York, also studied the Latin tradition. They explained, “[t]he Latin tradition, especially among the Stoics, speaks of conscientia with some frequency. Conscientia can involve personal knowledge of oneself, without any particular moral connotation.” Used in this sense, conscientia is akin to self-awareness. Conscientia was also used to denote the knowledge of having done good or evil. In addition, Bosman also continued, explaining, “already in 1 Clement, conscience repeatedly emerges: a good conscience is required of the members of

1 On the other hand, she continues, “examination of consciousness” sharpens our awareness of both positive and negative aspects of our attitudes and behaviors. Marjorie J. Thompson, Soul Feast (Louisville, KY, 1995), 85.
5 First Letter of Clement, originally titled Letter to the Church of Corinth, also called First Epistle of Clement or 1 Clement, a letter to the Christian church in Corinth from the church of Rome, traditionally ascribed to and almost certainly written by St. Clement I of Rome circa 96 CE. An important piece of patristic literature by an Apostolic Father, it is extant in a 2nd-century Latin translation, which is possibly the oldest surviving Latin Christian work. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/First-Letter-of-Clement, consulted on May 23, 2023).
the community (1:3; 41:1).” Bosman briefed the commentaries from early patristic fathers; Justin depicts conscience as a judge who condemns evil deeds. Origen takes up Paul’s relationship between conscience and testimony, describes God as witness to our conscience and prescribes self-examination of conscience. Basil recommends that monks examine their conscience on daily basis. John Chrysostom describes conscience as an interior, incorruptible judge, who can accuse as an interior tribunal given by God to the human being at creation which anticipates the Last Judgment, as a teacher, whose help cannot be taken from anyone and as a lawgiver for all humanity. Michel Rosenfeld explains the fallibility of conscience of Augustine saying that Paul and Augustine did not believe that conscience was infallible and continued by showing Augustine’s Letters, in saying “people may be unwilling to read the law in their hearts that is accessible through their conscience.”

MEDIEVAL AGE

We cannot miss Thomas Aquinas in the medieval age. Mariano Delgado (2012) explains Aquinian conscience, saying “[f]or Thomas, synderesis as a rational habitus describes “a by nature innate adaptation to first

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6 Homilies on Jeremiah 6:2, Philip A. Bosman, ibid, 651.
7 Dialogue with Trypho 93.2. The Dialogue with Trypho is a discussion in which Justin tries to prove the truth of Christianity to a learned Jew named Trypho. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Justin-Martyr, consulted on May 23, 2023).
8 Contra Celsus 1.46. According to Britannica, “[t]hese early apologetics came to a climax in the eight books of Against Celsus, a treatise written by Origen around 246–248 to answer the still troublesome work of a Platonist and critic of Christianity dating from about 70 years earlier and claiming to speak “the word of truth” (alêthês logos). (consulted on May 23, 2023).
9 Homilies on Jeremiah 6:2, Philip A. Bosman, ibid, 651.
10 Asceticon 1.5, ibid.
11 Four discourses, chiefly on the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, Chap.4.4.
12 Four discourses, chiefly on the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, Chap.2.2.
13 Homilies on Genesis, 54.1;52.4.
principles of action, which are natural principle of natural law”\textsuperscript{15} (\textit{Summa Theologiae}, 1, 79, 12c)\textsuperscript{16} Thomas Aquinas’ contribution of the discourse on conscience still prevails in contemporary world by severing two different concepts. Mariano (2012) continues:

Like the radiance of a divine light, therein shines the supreme practical principle that the human being in his willing, judging, and acting has to do the good and has to refrain from evil (“\textit{bonum faciendum, malum, vitandum}”), while \textit{conscientia} as actus (\textit{Summa theologiae}, 1.79, 13c) stands for the conscience in the current situation that directs the application of these principles to the behavior demanded in certain situation.\textsuperscript{17}

Many moral theologians acknowledge two levels of conscience from Aquinas’ anthropology are also shown in both \textit{Gaudium et Spes} (GS) and \textit{Dignitatis Humanae} (DH) and the tension on the nature of conscience itself because of different level of conscience could be the most basic tension in GS and DH. Pope Benedict XVI also in his 1991 speech interpreted the medieval tradition as offering two levels to the concept of conscience, \textit{synteresis} (which Pope Benedict XVI suggests is better rendered as \textit{anamnesis}) and conscience. Synteresis or anamnesis is, Pope Benedict XVI says, “an inner repugnance to evil and an attraction to the good. The act of conscience applies this basic knowledge to

\begin{itemize}
    \item Kim Jin-hyuk (2020) said despite every failure in our daily life, conscience always pushes us to live a good life. C.S. Lewis found a hope from natural law, but he also acknowledged limits of natural law at the same time. Lewis’ reasoning began from here and Lewis thought in \textit{Mere Christianity} (58p) that there is a self-leading or conducting, supranatural force as God the force that drives us to live a good life with such virtues as fairness, trust, generosity etc. C.S.Lewis interprets such virtues by putting an emphasis on ‘ordo amoris (order of love)’ of Augustine. recit, Kim Jin-Hyuk, \textit{Mere Christian: Imagination, Reason and Faith of C.S. Lewis}, (Seoul, 2020) 150-156.
    \item Mariano Delgado (2012) named Thomas Aquinas as “intellectualist” because, “Thomas concedes a central position to reason and sense experience as a bridge between the original conscience and the judgment of the conscience insofar as the process of application is a rational operation and insofar as the inner tendency of the intellect toward the perception of the moral and logical truth merely is innate in the human being. Ibid, 653p. Bonaventure and the Francescan tradition following him embody the “voluntarist” school, insofar as the accent therein lies upon the will to do what is good, and \textit{synderesis} as “potential affectiva” that naturally tends toward the good is assigned to the sphere of the will and the disposition, while conscientia resides in the realm of the understanding as a proficiency (habitus) of the practical intellect in the judgment of actions (In 2. Sent. 39.2.1). Ibid. 654.
\end{itemize}
the particular situation.”18 Josef Fuchs (1987) named synderesis as the “subjective-orientation” and the process leading to practical judgment as the “objective-orientation” of conscience. Fuchs gave commentary on subjective-orientation, saying, “having inner knowledge of the moral goodness of the Christian, and as standing before God, and Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.”19 Regarding objective-orientation, Fuchs said, “[it] concerns the material content of the function of conscience and how we are to relate in the world.”20 This objective-orientation can be found in GS sec. 43, as “see that divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city”, also in DH sec. 3, as “the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience and finally in GS sec. 16, as “hermeneutical lens for analyzing what our relationship with the world is to be.”21

In medieval times, there were two ways monasticism took roles in conscience. First one is formation of conscience by Irish penitential. Hugh Connolly explained monastic penance as ‘theological turn toward the person and more particularly the stirring and fomenting of personal conscience at play in the monastically molded Celtic penitential praxis’ and then regarded the penitential as ‘key in addressing the deficiencies of the older canonical Mediterranean model which had held previously sway in Europe.22 In this sense, monastery was a locus of conscience formation.23

The second one is the practice of conscience. The Cluniac reform of

23 Ibid.
“Peace of God” is also a product from a part of conscience. In pointing out the Cluniac reform leading “Peace of God”, Benedict XVI says, “[i]n this way, in the conscience of the peoples of Europe during that long process of gestation, which was to lead to their ever clearer recognition two fundamental elements for the construction of society matured, namely, the value of the human person and the primary good of peace.” In the Enlightenment era, Esther Reed (2012) found, saying “the strong emphasis among 16th and 17th century Jesuit theologians on the function of natural reason and tasks of casuistry (Gabriel Vasquez (1549-1604), Francisco

24 Regarding for the non-violence, in Latin patristics, Augustine is frequently talked who attached a great value to conscience and interiority including his argument fixated on freedom of conscience to the Jews, quoting Psalm 59:11. Augustine was followed by Bernard of Clairvaux in the middle age monastic era by quoting the same biblical passage commented on by Augustine to stop anti-Jewish violence. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Conscience”, Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception 5, (Berlin/Boston, 2012), 652.


26 A Spanish Jesuit monk (1549-1604) who was missionary to Greek region (at that time, the current Greece was under the Ottoman Empire’s rule). Eric DeMeuse explains, “Vasquez began composing his selective commentary on the Summa theologiae in 1575, revising this work for publication between 1591 and his death in 1604. Eric DeMeuse, “Spanish Jesuits and ‘The Greeks’:Reception and Perception of the Eastern Church by Luis de Molina, Francisco Suarez, and Gabriel Vasquez”, The Journal of Theological Studies, 69 (Pt.1, Oxford, 2018), 159.
Suarez (1548-1617) evidences their various concerns with the jurisprudence of the limits of political authority and principles of law that might facilitate an international community of states. Grotius follows Aquinas in understanding conscience as the act of applying the first principles of practical reason to a particular situation.

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27. DeMeuse wrote, “[e]ach of these thinkers—especially Suarez—greatly influenced the trajectory of Jesuit education and formation.” In his footnote, DeMeuse continued, “[d]uring their lifetimes, Suarez and Vasquez proved deeply influential on their students and the Society, even serving on a commission in 1593 to evaluate and revise the 1586 Ratio Studiorum. Ibid, 136.

28. Hugo Grotius was born in 1583 in Delft. The humanist tradition was in Holland, the homeland of Erasmus, still call the group of citizens interested in humanism, was international in character and extended into various European lands, in loose connection to the respective confessions. Hugo was considered a prodigy and put on display everywhere. At the age of eleven, in 1594, he began study in Leiden. He gained doctorate in law in Orleans. After returning from France in 1599, he moved to the Hague, where he admitted as a lawyer at the provincial court of Holland and the supreme court of the provinces of Holland and Zeeland. He also wrote his best-known work for the defence of Christianity, On the Truth of the Christian Religion (De veritate religionis Christianae) Henning Graf Reventlow, History of Biblical Interpretation 3 (translated by James O. Duke, Atlanta, 2010), 209-212. He began composition of De iure belli ac pacis (On the law of war and peace), which was published by a Parisian press in 1625. It quickly made Grotius famous. As Ambassador to France in 1634, Grotius began his diplomatic duties in Paris the following year. It is hard to gauge his success as ambassador: while he did help to negotiate a treaty which led to the end of the Thirty Years’ War, he could also be outmaneuvered in the diplomatic game. During this time, Grotius returned to the theological issues which had earlier caused him such grief. The project of Christian unity—harmonizing both the various Protestant factions and the Protestants with the Catholics—became increasingly important to him. Both intellectually and practically, it was a task which suited him and his place in life: intellectually, because Christian unity raised many conceptual puzzles which challenged his mind; practically, because as ambassador for one of the great European powers, he could use his position to press the cause. Of course, the cause was doomed to failure—certainly, it was well beyond Grotius’ abilities. Yet, it did lead him to write some extremely interesting and influential works, many of which were collected in his Opera Omnia Theologica. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/grotius, visited on May 24, 2023). Another Benedictine monk paved the way to hand over the discourse of conscience in hermeneutical context to the late 19c and contemporary times. According to James Keenan S.J., Dom Odon Lottin (1880-1965) a Belgian Benedictine monk said “[h]is striking break with the manualists is seen by the hermeneutical context in which he establishes the conscience as foundational to the moral life. James Keenan, S.J., “To Follow and to Form over Time”, David DeCosse, Kristin Heyer, ed Conscience & Catholicism, (Maryknoll, NY, 2015), 125.

CONCLUSION

As I found the connection between documents of Vatican II and the origins of discourse, historical aspect of discourse on conscience in the context of self-examination and other contexts which is not related to consciousness, shows which dimension of the conscience are still vividly valid, in our Catholic faith, by shown in CCC and canon law as well, let alone the documents of Vatican II. This can be a basis of such a current discourse of conscience by the theologians of today as that of Bernhard Häring.

30 I would like to show sincere gratitude to monks in Saint John’s Abbey; Fr. Lewis Grobe, Novicemaster/Formation Director in Saint John’s Abbey who guided the selection process of topics as novice’s independent learning project which takes for four months and gave the permission to submit this paper to OBSCVLTA; Fr. Timothy Backous, who taught the moral theology as novice’s classes in the monastery; and Fr. Nickolas Becker, who proofread this paper and advised in the process of submission. Finally, I am also thankful to Mr. David Wuolu, Collection Development Librarian, Saint John’s University for his academic support.

31 For example, when Bernhard Häring wrote his letter to Commonweal regarding Humanae Vitae. He said,
   i) Those who can accept [Humanae Vitae] with an honest conscience must do so, with all the consequences.
   ii) Those who doubt whether they can study it thoroughly and use further information to form a clear conscience.
   iii) Those who, with an honest conscience, cannot accept the teaching and requirements of Humanae Vitae, must follow their honest conscience.
   iv) Priest must instruct the faithful clearly about the Pope’s teaching. However, I do not see how they can be denied the right to speak out their own opinion with equal honesty.

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