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REFLECTIONS ON CONSCIENCE AND AUTHORITY[†]

MOST REVEREND JOHN J. WRIGHT*

IF I WERE TO WRITE A BOOK of reflections on conscience and authority, I would confine myself to the discussion of these powerful and sometimes conflicting moral forces as they operate within the Holy Catholic Church.

I would do so aware, of course, that conscience and authority are also at work and in conflict in the general society, in the family, in professional life, in the university world—wherever there are persons in societies of whatever kind or origin. I realize, moreover, that the most bitter arena of conflict between conscience and authority in our century is probably the modern State which, in all its forms, tends to be characterized by a certain absolutism which creates grave problems for even the natural conscience but tormenting antagonisms for the consciences of those who believe in a supernatural order transcending and subordinating the claims of secular authority.

I would write of the concepts of conscience and of authority within the Church, however, because when these concepts and their mutual relations within the Church are clear, when a Christian conscience is soundly formed, a model is proposed for all other societies and Christians are the better prepared personally to face up to parallel tensions elsewhere and socially to contribute to the easing of these in their other forms and areas of conflict.

I would note carefully, in thus limiting my discussion to the Church, that Pope Pius XII could, and did, distinguish sharply between the spirit of authority in the Church and the spirit of “authoritarianism.” I would recall his careful distinction between the structure of authority in the Church and that in totalitarian regimes, insisting, as did he, that these latter “can claim no point of resemblance to hierarchical constitutions of the Church,” precisely because of the respective attitudes of these and of the Church toward “the clear and incontrovertible dictates of conscience,” “the laws of individual and social living written

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in the hearts of men" and "the freedom and improvement of the human person."¹

I would probably develop this point at some length, having in mind the confusions in its regard, confusions always wide-spread but now intensified by writers like Mr. Paul Blanshard. I would seek to bring to the American reader some of the reflections of their European Catholic brethren on the supremely important point made by the Auxiliary Bishop of Rouen at a 1961 Anglo-French symposium on problems of authority in the Church:

the hierarchical government of the Church will always be radically different in its innermost nature and in its visible manifestations from the hierarchical government of a human society of secular type. It is only to the extent that sin corrupts the hierarchy by depriving it of the God-given sense of its organic function in the Church, and developing in it a 'will to power' that knows no limit and has no religious purpose, that the Church becomes that 'huge sociological beast' which used to terrify Simone Weil (and many others in good faith after and before her time).²

Jean Cadet, more positively, emphasizes how the use of pastoral authority in the Church is necessarily different from the use of authority in any secular society, since *justice*, at best, is the object of secular authority, whereas the whole jurisdictional order of the Church must be the servant of *love*. This is a point which I would hope to develop greatly in my book; I mention it now because it cannot be too soon emphasized in any discussion of conscience and authority, or of anything else within the Church.

¹ Address by Pope Pius XII to the Roman Rota, October 2, 1945.

² Pailler, *Considerations on the Authority of the Church*, in PROBLEMS OF AUTHORITY 23.

My first chapter would have to include a pointed explanation of one reason why there is so much seemingly tentative and even hesitant talk about the relations between conscience and authority. In fact, the problem is relatively modern in time and not even now universal in its geography, the contemporary statement of the problem of conscience being linked to recent and regional claims with respect to the sovereign independence of the individual person. In clarifying the implications of this fact, I would depend heavily on Jacques Leclercq who contends that citizens of the Western world suffer from a certain optical illusion when they adjudge the sovereign independence of the individual person to be one of the major themes of human literature, political, moral and other. On the contrary, this theme, including its statement in terms of conscience, is even now almost confined to Western Europe, North America, Great Britain, plus some contiguous and scattered zones influenced by ideas transplanted from these.

In the Western world, however, the theme of the supremacy of conscience, in a valid sense and also with some exaggerations, Leclercq can compare to a steadily expanding river, flooding in all directions; it has become an *idée fixe*, a master theme, perhaps, *the* master theme of Western civilization. People have become accustomed to link, somewhat over-simply, its origins to controversies arising out of sixteenth century religious and political disputes. However, as in the case of so many great ideas, it is possible to dig up from the more distant past precursor statements at least of the problem surrounding the idea. Those who read history per-

sueded that there is nothing new under the sun—or that, as Marie Antoinette's milliner put it, there is never anything new except what has been forgotten—find some earlier affirmations of the supremacy of conscience in Greco-Roman antiquity (drama, philosophy and eloquence) and even in the literature and ethic of the Far East.

Whatever of this, the theme of the sovereignty of conscience, validly stated and otherwise, like that of the supremacy of the person has chiefly developed in Western Europe and in relatively modern times. The controversy passed from the religious to the political arena in the seventeenth century, probably reaching its first high political plateau with the French concepts of the Rights of Man in the eighteenth century and pressing forward thereafter in politico-social movements inspired by the idea of liberty, above all personal liberty, and thus becoming associated with movements and points of view that came to be called "liberal."

The orderly development of my subject would require that my second chapter concern itself, perhaps, with the history of the concept of conscience. This could be a book all by itself; indeed, many books have already been written on the concept of conscience in different times and places, even on the great changes in the concept of conscience within the Christian tradition from New Testament days down to our own times. I would point out that conscience is one of those words which everyone uses readily enough and which most think of as not only basic but also very simple, though an invitation to define it usually reveals confusion and embarrassment. Fortunately, it is more

easy and, indeed, better to have a good conscience than it is to define one, as Thomas à Kempis pointed out about compunction. People can feel very strongly about conscience and be quite fierce in asserting its claims, while being little prepared to say what it is, even though, as they might point out, "everyone *knows* what it is." It is something like a spiral; everyone knows what a spiral is, but when pressed for a definition, most helplessly wiggle their fingers in the air.

In seeking to define conscience, some do so in inspirational terms, like those which little George Washington used when he wrote in his copy book, "labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire—conscience." Others still speak in the more negative terms of the so-called "accusing conscience," that stern, tormenting voice that only speaks to you when you have done something wrong and which many suppose to be the only true sense of conscience. This, I think, is what people usually mean when they use phrases like "a New England conscience," which, under study, often means the guilty recognition that you have spent too much money or that you are likely to be found out in some indiscretion and thus find your name in the paper, or, what is worse, to have forfeited your credit in the local bank.

This chapter could be extremely long and singularly boring except to those interested in semantics or the historical development of philosophical concepts. And so, I would simply invoke some dictionary definitions which seem to do justice to the general concept of conscience and would then throw in some bibliographical references to more precise definitions and

hasten on to the more imaginative considerations which stimulate me most.

Most would probably settle for the definition in the *Century Dictionary*; published in the period 1889-1911, it reflects the notion that is probably uppermost in mind among those who speak of conscience with positive commitment still. For it, moral conscience is

the consciousness that the acts for which a person believes himself to be responsible do or do not conform to his ideal of right; the moral judgment of the individual applied to his own conduct, in distinction from his perception of right and wrong in the abstract, and in the conduct of others. It manifests itself in the feeling of *obligation* or *duty*, the moral imperative 'I ought' or 'I ought not'; hence the phrases the 'voice of conscience,' the 'dictates of conscience,' and the like.

This dictionary definition reflects a heavily individualistic concept basically consistent with the personal element present from the beginning in the Christian doctrine concerning the idea of conscience but adding a certain exclusiveness and debatable autonomy, with overtones discordant to the Christian ear, from post-Reformation, Renaissance and Enlightenment times. Nonetheless, it is a working definition for our purposes, as are also some of the descriptions of conscience with which Victorian philosophical literature abounds. A good example is that by Sir William Hamilton, the nineteenth century Scottish philosopher (not to be confused with the husband of Lord Nelson's mistress, they having the same name, over-lapping dates but somewhat different preoccupations):

Man, as conscious of his liberty to act, and of the law by which his actions ought

to be regulated, recognizes his personal accountability, and calls himself before the internal tribunal which we denominate *conscience*. Here he is either acquitted or condemned. The acquittal is connected with a peculiar feeling of pleasurable exultation, as the *condemnation* with a peculiar feeling of painful humiliation—remorse.

Such definitions or descriptions leave us with several unsolved problems to which we shall have to devote later chapters of our book. The first is the problem of the relationship of the dictates of internal conscience, so understood, to the demands of external authority, the heart of our present reflections. Another is that of how and whence such a conscience derives its knowledge of the law by which its actions are to be regulated; in a word, how is such a conscience formed or illumined? What norms, other than its own *ipse dixit*, does it have?

On this latter point my second chapter will have to evaluate many different speculations. Protestant Christian theories include explanations often bound up with illuminatism or even direct divine inspiration, if not revelation; others, more often in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, relate (as did Sir William Hamilton and the even greater Sir William Blackstone) the concept and function of conscience to the concept of Natural Law, a source of knowledge of God's will which a solid Protestant tradition once exalted much higher than does any Catholic doctrine of Natural Law, since the interpretation of the demands and sanctions of Natural Law for Catholics has always been within the context of the mind or understanding of the Church where revelation serves to illumine, to purify and to warm areas of

Natural Law which are otherwise obscure, harsh or unduly rigorous.

For the development of the Catholic Christian understanding of the concept and range of conscience, I would refer my gentle reader to a standard treatise in moral theology. The choices are many, but for the purposes of my book, which I would seek to relate to contemporary problems and to infuse with the spirit in which these problems can best be met, I would suggest the first volume of Father Bernard Häring's *Moral Theology for Priests and Laity* entitled *The Law of Christ*. There my reader will find a more than adequate survey of the concepts of conscience from the pre-Christian days of Epictetus, Seneca, the Stoics, Chrysippus and Ovid (whose definition of conscience as "God-in-us" is a remote ancestor of little George Washington's copy-book phrase) through the Sacred Scriptures (which are eloquent on the power of conscience but not entirely clear on the definition of its nature) to the development of moral conscience in Patristic writings (especially St. Augustine and St. Jerome) and the great scholastic philosophers and theologians.

These latter, Father Häring will point out, offer diverse theories regarding the nature of conscience, while agreeing on its claims and its power. The theories of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas are intellectualistic, those of Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure are voluntaristic. Both are consistent with Father Häring's own contention, typically Catholic as distinct from "direct voice of God" concepts of conscience, that God is indeed at work in the depths of conscience, at work as a person "who calls and invites, a judge,

living, absolute, the source of the summons and the law," but that we ourselves contribute, out of our natures something which must be trained to play its part in the decisions of conscience. Even if we Catholics do not acknowledge the dictate of conscience as being the direct voice of God, as some others tend to do, we do speak of conscience as including somehow the voice of God. "It is the voice of God, but in the sense that we must contribute something of our own in the formation of the decision of a conscience which is right in God's sight. Error is possible in our decision, but we are able to trace it to its source." That source, and it operates commonly, is in ourselves, not God, and it is, of course, the presence and perils of it which so complicate the discussion of conscience itself and its relations with authority.

This is particularly true, as my chapter will point out, when there is talk of the freedom of conscience as that further concept is debated in our day. *The fact is that, contrary to a general but loose impression, conscience binds far more than it loosens.* Conscience is not something by which I am set free from obligations so much as it is something by which I am bound, controlled and on occasions sternly rebuked. It is necessary to get this unpleasant fact (if it is unpleasant) in clear focus at the outset of any discussion of conscience. This is, of course, what befogs much discussion, outside the Ecumenical Council, of the progress of the debate on religious liberty as an aspect of freedom of conscience; it also makes extremely delicate the debate on freedom of conscience in the Council itself.

Bishop De Smedt, whose magnificent

address introducing the initial draft on religious liberty was universally applauded at the Council, was painfully aware of the widespread confusion on his point not only among possible critics of his position but also among some who have no idea what he is talking about and might, in fact, reject it if they did, but claim him as their champion.

Hence, De Smedt could not safely as an honest Christian nor prudently as a competent debater leave his case on the apodictic assertion of Pope John, namely: "Every human being has the right to honor God according to the dictates of an upright conscience, and therefore the right to worship God privately and publicly. . . ."³ He is obligated to shoot at enemies from half a dozen directions, those who wish to scuttle his ship and who clamber over its prow in the honest effort to sink it, and those who are scampering aboard in the aft section and all around the sides in an effort to sail it into harbors for which De Smedt is not destined and of which he wants no part.

And so, he was obliged to devote whole sections of his Council speech to explaining what he is *not* talking about, since what he *is* talking about is highly mysterious to a generation which talks passionately of conscience, but often to the confusion of the cause.

Accordingly, my chapter on conscience will quote at length from Bishop De Smedt's speech to the Council, beginning with the section in which he says:

When religious liberty is defended, it is not asserted that it is proper for man to consider the religious problem accord-

ing to his own whim without any moral obligation and decide for himself according to his own will whether or not to embrace religion (religious indifferentism).

Nor is it affirmed that the human conscience is free in the sense that it is, as it were, outside the law, absolved from any obligation toward it (laicism).

Nor is it said that falsehood is to be considered on an equal footing with truth, as though there were no objective norm of truth (doctrinal relativism).

Nor is it admitted that man in any way has a quasi-right to maintain a peaceful complacency in the midst of uncertainty (dilettantistic pessimism).⁴

Then I shall return to the *Century Dictionary* definition, adding a word or two about the positive claims of conscience as these are set forth in St. Thomas Aquinas and in a very brief but very forceful phrase of the Fourth Lateran. The Lateran Council said that anyone who acts against conscience, acts so to his damnation. St. Thomas specifically relates the possibility of damnation to the relations between the dictates of conscience and those of authority when there may be conflict between the two. He does so in many passages, one of which will suffice:

Therefore conscience is more to be obeyed than authority imposed from outside. For conscience obliges in virtue of divine command, whether written down in a code or instilled by natural law. To weigh conscience in the scales against obedience to legal authority is to compare the weight of divine and of human decrees. The first obliges more than the second, and sometimes against the second.

³ Encyclical Letter of John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963).

⁴ Address of Bishop Emile De Smedt, introducing the draft on religious liberty at Vatican Council II. For a fuller treatment of this matter see the eventual Council *Declaration on Religious Liberty*.

Wherefore, my next chapter must, obviously, concern itself with the concept of authority. I shall be the more eager to write this chapter because the concept of authority in the Church, like that of conscience, involves difficulties which are everywhere encountered in the contemporary ecumenical dialogue. Moreover, the concept and fact of authority are not merely widely discussed at the moment; they are also universally threatened. Within the family, within political society, in the world of teaching and philosophy, in the realm of morals and religion, authority is of all concepts the least popular. On the decline in the prestige of authority and in the recognition of the constructive and noble elements of the virtue of obedience, another whole book could be written. I think it unlikely that any editor will be clamoring for it nowadays and I gravely fear that, given the *zeitgeist*, the Thomas More Society will not confer a medal on the man who writes it.

However, a plain, blunt man, I shall spell out some basic truths about authority, relying once again on the doctors of morals, dogma and laws *utriusque* to point out the premises and develop the corollaries of the Christian and human case for authority. I shall be grateful, of course, if the Ecumenical Council, plus the literature surrounding it, so speaks about the nature, limits and claims of authority as to make these more persuasive to fallen and capricious human nature, always allergic to authority, particularly in an age of democracy and in the land of youth and freedom beyond the ocean bars; where the air is full of sunlight and the flag is full of stars.

I shall emphasize that authority is not

just a *word*; it is, as John Todd sagely notes, a *fact* whose manifestations everybody accepts or endures.⁵ I shall follow, in this connection, Yves Simon in recalling that in every society, political and religious, public and private, necessary and voluntary, authority is essential as a cause of united action even in the smallest and most compact community; it is necessary also for the very volition, let alone the attainment of the common good. Considered in its essential functions, therefore, authority is neither a necessary evil nor a lesser good, nor lesser evil nor the consequence of any evil or deficiency. It is, like nature and society, unqualifiedly good. Even Bertrand Russell, without theological premises or preoccupations of any kind, develops the pragmatic but significant contention that a healthy society requires both central control and individual initiative; without control there is anarchy, without initiative there is stagnation.⁶ It will be my task in this chapter to suggest that without certain metaphysical and even theological realities beyond these superficial co-relative forces, neither the individual initiatives nor the central controls are likely to stand up very long.

In accomplishing my task I shall be grateful to many authors, particularly to Romano Guardini for a brilliant essay in which he questions the radical possibility of authority in an atheist scheme of things. I shall not, of course, even mention Guardini in my chapter, hoping that no one will translate his article until after I am dead; but I shall share with the reader the things that I shall have stolen from

⁵ TODD, PROBLEMS OF AUTHORITY 3.

⁶ Russell, AUTHORITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL (1960).

it, particularly those which indicate how authority is bound up with the origins, divine and human, of our being and how contempt of the authority of parents, as all other human sources of what we are, grows fatally in proportion as our recognition of the mystery of creation and the fact of God grows more and more agnostic, however sentimental, and finally atheist.

But I shall develop this important point by borrowing again from Father Bernard Häring, who, writing of the mutual interplay of conscience and authority, points out how conscience instinctively seeks the guidance of authority and presupposes its existence, even as genuine authority by its very nature postulates the existence and freedom of conscience; authority cannot exist, function or accomplish its divinely appointed purposes save in a moral universe where conscience is alive and at work.

Then I shall use John Todd's introductory essay in *Problems of Authority* for points for meditation on the origins of authority. This reminds us not only that both authority and obedience presuppose conscience, but that both are related to the most intimate and profound notion of *being* itself. Todd, perceiving that the being of creatures is itself relational, traces the nature and claims of authority from the very origins and authors of our being, finding that the ultimate meaning of authority is to be found in the reality conveyed by the word "author."

This is the same point, philosophical and semantic, that Romano Guardini makes. It involves the mystery of creation and the meaning which that mystery gives to the

authority of God; it suggests the limited but analogous nature of human authority, limited because all human authority is devoid of that character of absolute authorship which belongs to God alone; analogous, however, because men can be the "authors" who increase or develop (*augere*) the *growth* of that to which God has given *existence*.

Creation does not mean for many of our fellow men what it does for us in the Church; neither, therefore, does authority. But for those in the Church, the concept of authority on whatever level we encounter it will be shaped and hallowed by the mystery of creation, directly and fully in what pertains to God, analogously and proportionately in what pertains to anyone less than God. Christian doctrine will bring us to see that human authority is a phenomenon and service whose origin is in God's creative act. Everyone who exercises authority is invested therewith by God and will have to answer to God for the use he makes of it.

For this reason, it is established Christian doctrine that one who holds authority stands to his subjects in the place of God. But this must be understood in its most positive and fruitful sense; it must not be limited to meaning that the superior, natural or religious, only represents the authority of God in any merely negative or inhibiting sense. Understood as God, who works through the constitution of nature and the dispensations of grace, must intend it for the building up of His Kingdom, authority, communicated to others by God, must mean that he who holds it represents divine love not less than divine authority, divine mercy not less than divine justice and, in sum, the *life-giving*

power of God.⁷

This means that authority is not only established to regulate, to order, to control and, on occasion, to forbid, all in analogy to God; it means also what is usually much more important and urgent, namely, that authority is given to inspire and to encourage the initiatives of others, as does God by His grace; to coordinate the purposeful lives, strivings, aspirations, undertakings and energies of others, to press forward, leading, directing and challenging others, as God, by His grace and through the voice of conscience, is constantly calling to new levels of excellence those subject to His sway and responsible to His authority, even as He sometimes, by a grace or a rebuke of conscience, dissuades, prohibits or overrules them.

Human authority needs always the spiritual disciplines and moral restraints that reason and revelation both inculcate; those who hold authority must, for their own salvation's sake, be mindful that they are, in themselves, not only the equals but the least of the brethren: "Each of you must have the humility to think others better men than himself, and study the welfare of others, not his own. Yours is to be the same mind which Christ Jesus showed. . . ." (Phil. 2, 3-7).

But while humility is essential to the salvation of one who holds authority, it is not enough for the achievement of that perfection of individuals and society for the service of which authority is given. These divine purposes require that human authority be not only Christ-like in humility but somehow God-like in its full and

positive use of office to lead; Christ emptied Himself and became the equal of slaves, but not that they might remain slaves but that by adding His powers to their deepest desires, He might lift them to a level a little less than the angels, crowning them with glory and honor, giving *them* rule over God's handiwork. This is the purpose and office of authority, not contradiction and restraint only.

At this point we should note how the modern Popes have clearly conceived their office as involving authority not merely to rebuke error and admonish the erring, but to proclaim truth and to inspire all who seek it. They have seen authority as obliging them to provide intellectual leadership, spiritual direction, effective example and indefatigable challenge to all who acknowledge Peter's authority and depend upon it for positive leadership as well as negative guidance in the battles for truth and goodness to which their consciences summon them. Father Congar can, as a result, happily write:

In the nineteenth century, Romanticist literature, and often history also, had spread the idea that power and the holding of very high office offered an opportunity for greater enjoyment, for complete freedom to do as one liked and for helping oneself. The Popes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and with them, the whole body of the bishops, have stood before the eyes of the whole world as men for whom power is responsibility and authority service.⁸

Nor can it be otherwise once it is recognized, as it must be, that authority in the Church is always a relative thing, a means necessary, under the present dispensation, to an end which is Love. In-

⁷ Corbishley, *Power and Authority, The Way*, October, 1963, pp. 285-93.

⁸ Congar, *PROBLEMS OF AUTHORITY*.

deed, it is only in the Church that we can speak of authority as the servant of Love, rather than Justice, of which authority must elsewhere be the instrument. This is what Monsignor Journet means when he writes:

The order of jurisdiction, necessary and of divine origin though it is, is not the noblest or most divine thing in the Church. All its greatness is derived from its purpose which is to be the servant of Love. 'Peter,' Cajetan writes, 'is the minister of the Church, not because he uses his power to serve her.' Did not our Lord himself say that he had come to serve? When then the Pope declares that he is the servant of the servants of God, he is telling the truth. But the Church is greater and nobler than what exists for its sake. The Papacy is for the Church, not vice versa. It is therefore true that the Pope is not a master but a servant, and that the Church, absolutely speaking, is more excellent and nobler than he, although, from the standpoint of jurisdiction, he is her head.

Not for nothing did Our Lord link His conferring of jurisdiction to Peter's three-fold declaration of love for Christ and *therefore* for the flock that he must serve. Not for nothing must the Pope, the Sovereign Pontiff, sign himself the servant of the servants of God.

By this time, my gentle reader will require of my book a chapter explaining how it came to pass that conscience and authority, the concepts of which are so interrelated and the functions of which appear, theoretically at least, so harmoniously reconciled in Church doctrine, have often grown so far apart as to find themselves so often antagonists, almost antinomies, in so much history, literature and private speculation.

This chapter will require a review of

the political, cultural and scientific forces which have influenced, for better or for worse, the minds of Christians and altered sometimes the accent, if not the voice, of the Church herself through the centuries since Christianity came out of the catacombs and entered the mainstream of human history, sometimes to influence the direction of that stream, sometimes to be influenced by it or even swept along briefly within it. Then our chapter will seek to reconstruct if not the history of the primitive Church, at least some recollection of what must have been its mood when it was still so close to the unifying person of the Risen Christ that its unity was still that of brethren in a close-knit family community of which God was the Father, Christ the elder Brother and the Church, whose prototype is Mary, was the intimately known and loved fostering mother. In such a family-community, compactly one, personal conscience would rarely have been the starkly individual, lonely, sovereign and even defiant thing that we find it to be, almost by ideal, in and after the sixteenth century. Authority, too, must have seemed quite different in such a Christian community from what it doubtless came to seem when the princes of God's people began to dress, to talk and often to act like the other princes of the Renaissance world, the ideas and values of which were so little related to those of the primitive Christian community, or, indeed, the Church itself at times.

Perhaps as our liturgical practices and theological concepts begin to express, with refreshed clarity, the ancient Catholic attitudes and insights on other levels, there will be a renewed understanding of the

interplay of conscience and authority and a moving away from the starkly individualistic concepts of both conscience and authority which have developed in recent centuries. In history there is no bringing back the past, but in the case of the living Church it is always possible and, indeed, a duty to strip away the dead accretions of the past to reveal the essential timeless nature of the living Church itself. Such a stripping away reveals in the early centuries of Catholicism a vision dominated by what St. Augustine called the *Christus Totus*. Christians are in essence and always a community; then they even lived as a community, wrote to each other as members of a community, were martyred as representatives of a community, prayed as a community. The very fact of being constantly subjected to possible outbreaks of persecution reinforced this sense of the community; it should still. Even their failures in the moral problems of life were principally failures to maintain the "concord and harmony" of the community; they should be so seen still. In such a community the conscience of the Christian early acquired a formation which preserved it from individualism and moral solipsism.

On the side of authority, also, the situation was (and essentially is) such that Father Congar can write:

In the early Church authority was that of men who were like princes in a community which was wholly sanctified, *plebs sancta*, and overshadowed by the Spirit of God. The Church leaders were all the more conscious of their authority in that they saw it as the vehicle of the mystery of salvation which God wishes to accomplish in his Church. They wanted to be, and knew that they were, moved by the Spirit, but they also knew that the

Spirit inhabits the Christian community and in the exercise of their authority they remained closely linked to this community.⁹

But consciences, too, were moved by the same spirit; the formation of conscience was accomplished by a single spirit through the shared teachings of the single Mother Church, and this with the result that although conscience was warmly personal, as the Christian conscience must be, it was never sharply individualistic, as later influences have made the human conscience and most things else.

To suggest briefly how the sense of Christian community deteriorated, to the great hurt of concepts of conscience and of authority alike, I shall refer to a stimulating recent book by Theodore Westow, *The Variety of Catholic Attitudes*. It sketches what happened to early, authentic Christian communal and organic concepts of every kind, doctrinal, social, liturgical and moral. It reveals, for example, that by the eleventh century, though the feeling was still common that Christendom was still one and that the Catholic faith was still the universal foundation of society, nonetheless there were already many symptoms pointing to new, sometimes promising, sometimes disastrous developments.

I do not have time to analyze all these, but I can note swiftly the significance of the feudal rivalries which pre-figured national rivalries and independence. I can observe the effect of these on the Christian community, even on the deep levels of its doctrine, liturgy and morals. I can imagine how the gradual replacement of a land economy by a money economy intensified each individual's instinct for

⁹ *Ibid.*

personal independence. I shall not, then, be so startled when I begin to find the sense of community growing weaker and weaker in the religious literature of the Middle Ages, so that finally the whole accent of expression between, roughly, the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, falls increasingly on the first person singular when ordinary people are speaking and on the third person plural when people invested with authority are speaking—a very significant shift, indeed, from earlier usages.

Westow cites a typical paraphrase of the Creed, written in the eleventh century, and already set forth in the form of a highly individualistic prayer from which, significantly, the article about the Church is completely omitted! Small wonder that even spiritual life by this same time began to abound in individualistic forms of spirituality, visions, revelations and mystical experiences. All this prepares us for the later tendency to emancipate conscience itself more and more from the formative influence of anything but one's own insights, separate graces and private judgments.

Westow acknowledges, of course, that this fuller expression of the individual as distinct from the communal side of the human person is not without good effects in the development of human culture and those divine purposes by reason of which all things turn out for good for those who love God. But the passing evil out of which came the permanent good was sometimes evil indeed; it was particularly hurtful to profound devotion, to the authentic image of the Church and to Christian concepts of conscience and authority. Medieval and Renaissance de-

velopments gave impetus to new branches of dogmatic, moral and mystical theology and inaugurated discoveries in psychology which uncovered intimate facets of the human person as an individual; this period in our history made contributions both sound and lasting. But Westow rightly argues that it was unfortunate insofar as it over-concentrated on the individual, over-stressing the importance of purely individual experiences and emotions and leading to an individual sensitiveness, with complications unsettling to the delicate balance of society as well as that of the person.

All this threatened to dissolve the sense of the human community; it had already weakened the very sense of membership in the Church, tending as it did to turn religion into a wholly private affair. It made the ordinary man chafe under the guidance of authority and it tempted him to excessive confidence in his own spiritual strength apart from the Communion of Saints in the company of the Church. In terms of conscience, it accounts for the total difference between the Catholic position of St. Joan, even as late as the fifteenth century, and the completely Protestant position of Luther only a century later.

What happened in later history explains the dismay of a present day Anglican scholar over what has happened to the New Testament concept of conscience not only in modern society, but in the Church as he knows it. In his book *Conscience in the New Testament*, the Kaye Prize Essay for 1955, Professor C.A. Pierce contends that it is one thing to teach that conscience is inviolable and that no authority would be justified in

overruling it when it speaks out against an action or command which alerts it to protest, but that it is something quite different to suppose that conscience is infallible. He protests when the Church offers men no better guidance than "act according to conscience" she is abdicating the office to which she is appointed and is apostate to the first article of her Creed, *i.e.*, Jesus is Lord. He contends that the word conscience has been so torn out of its Christian context that in any conflict between conscience and Christ Himself, the modern opinion would make Christ come out second best!¹⁰

Reflection on this aspect of what has happened to the concept of conscience in modern times adds depth to the contention of Lord Acton that the Reformation turned out to be, in many respects, a movement against the freedom of conscience. It often left conscience subject to a new authority, the arbitrary initiative of a prince who might differ in religion from all his subjects; in any case, it left

¹⁰ The Anglican scholar's protest against the dangers of a subjectivist appeal to the individual conscience are seconded with strong support from Catholic sources, of course. Father Karl Rahner is quoted by Cahal Daly as chiding confessors and directors of conscience who abdicate from their role of direction by telling penitents to "follow their own conscience." "As if," he goes on, "the penitent were not precisely asking, and rightly asking, which of the thousand voices of his conscience is the authentic voice of God." It is not ultimately before one's conscience but before God that one is responsible. "And when is the voice of God more easy to recognize than when He speaks through the mouth of His Church? It is indeed only when the judgment of conscience coincides with this word that one can be sure of hearing truly the voice of conscience rather than the voice of one's own culpable self-deception."

the individual conscience without objective religious rudder in a turbulent sea of multiplying moral crises which has shattered, in the name of several "Christian consciences," the moral consensus of a Christian community which had already been shattered by the princes of this world in its social structure and is, therefore, now doubly removed from the original Total Christ who ruled the consciences and refined the authority of the original Christian community.

As a result, not all the rhetoric which has extolled the sovereignty of the modern personal conscience can cover the pathetic moral state in which it has so often left individuals. This rhetoric has, moreover, blinded us to the ugly face that exaggerated sense of the autonomy of individual conscience can give those whose consciences become not only the norm of their own moral lives but also their putative title to dominate the lives of others. I think it likely that, as a matter of relative statistics, there have probably been more hearts broken and hopes frustrated by the demands of someone else's "righteous conscience" than by the demands of public authority, especially when that someone else, in the name of conscience, has been demanding his way (or hers) rather than permit sons or daughters to do what every other voice of God and nature suggested that they should do.

For example: more than once in my life I have seen the look of implacable refusal or unbending rejection on the face of duly appointed authority; I have seen it in the movies and in the paintings which tell the tragedies of those who have suffered for conscience's sake at the

hands of authority. But in none of these have I seen colder fanaticism or more corpse-like absence of the living breath of Charity than that which I remember on one face, typical of thousands, the lips of which hissed at me, in the name of conscience, all the reasons why its owner would not permit his daughter to marry a man whom only he despised, for reasons which he alone could perceive. But how, in the climate of our times, could a mere bishop urge considerations of humanity or experience, of the mind or heart of the Church, let alone of romance, against the self-righteous declaration: "Bishop, will you dare to tell me that the Catholic Church expects me to change a decision I have made in the light of my conscience?"

So, too, when we are told, with what is obviously intended to be high-mindedness, that a man in public office will follow his sovereign individual conscience, heedless of any other voice, when making decisions affecting public policy and the lives, deaths or coming to birth of millions, we do well to remember the dread effects that like lonely consciences have sometimes had in history. One of the greatest exponents of the "I and God" sense of conscience was Oliver Cromwell. I can well imagine the people of Drogheda gladly preferring that the decision as to their fate depend on the common counsel of almost any commission, provided it included one or two people responsive to Natural Law, to fundamental decencies and the general teaching of the Church, rather than that it depend on the sovereign, majestic, righteous but totally mistaken individual conscience of Oliver Cromwell—or, for that matter, any other

individual, high or low.

Individual conscience is not always on the side of freedom, nor of life, nor of God, nor of man; "modern conscience" can mean moral solipsism, the arrogance and arbitrariness of which can be more horrendous, because more inaccessible to protest, than almost any despotism and certainly than any duly constituted authority which must function under written law—civil or canon.

Further, reflection on the deterioration of the sense of Christian community and the affect of this on both conscience and authority makes welcome the assurance of Westow—an assurance that all who live in these exciting years of the Council deeply feel—that we are on the threshold of a new era of human and of Church history. In this era the concepts of both conscience and authority hopefully will be revitalized and reconciled anew within the Church, where alone they can achieve that synthesis which enables both to serve the person, the image of God in creation. This fresh vision, both of human history and of the Church, is characterized by an awareness of the human person as being not exclusively communal nor exclusively individual, but both; it sees the person as being responsible simultaneously for himself and for his society and as one who must, therefore, have the full resources of enlightened conscience and responsible authority to guide him. In such a vision, personal morality is not centered on self, nor on society, but on both at once within, again, that *Christus Totus* of which Augustine spoke and of which the Church is at once the means, the instrument and the *Other Self* in history.

Within the Church, freshly appreciated

and newly loved, those who hold authority will be more sensitive to the nature of their offices and what must be their spirit. In this new mood men may welcome more perceptively that *formation* of the enlightened conscience the need for which is, by all odds, our supreme need as we move from the fragmented age of individualism into a more organic society, consistent with and, please God, better serving the human person.

Accordingly, a chapter of our eventual book must consider the role of the Church in the formation of conscience. This need is made the greater by recent developments in Protestant theology, not without side effects in the thinking of some Catholics. It reveals itself, of course, in connection with moral judgments generally, but given the preoccupations of our generation, it has become publicized chiefly in connection with moral assessments of contraception, abortion, divorce and euthanasia.

As we have seen, the traditional Protestant concepts of personal conscience were linked at least to the objective word of Scripture, however privately interpreted, or to norms of Natural Law, seen as God's Law almost as Scripture was God's Word and therefore as a control on conscience. But in the particular case of contraception Father de Lestapis sees a revolutionary change in the Protestant understanding of the nature of conscience.

Father de Lestapis put it this way: "The believer as he faces his God is the only judge in conscience, not only of the intentions which lead him to desire to limit births, but also of the validity of the

means he employs for the purpose."

The moral philosophers who put forth this "law of liberty" wish to defend some binding force for moral laws; but, as Father Gerald Kelly points out, in principle they cannot admit an absolute binding force covering every concrete case because they think this would conflict with the liberty of God and also with the liberty of the Christian as the child of God. Hence, while admitting that the moral laws are good general guides to what is right, some influential Protestant theologians defend as the ultimate standard of moral conduct what they call the "law of liberty" or the "law of love" in the New Testament. This "law of love" is superior to all other laws and may contradict them. The individual knows this law as it applies to him in the concrete situations of everyday life, not through any verbal formula, but rather through a sort of divine inspiration received within his own soul. In other words, in the depths of the soul there is an immediate contact with God—an intuition of love, as they call it—and this is the ultimate guide for individuals in their moral choices. This direct word of "permissive love" from God Himself is what the voice of conscience appears to have become in this recent school of Protestant ethic; it has had traces of effect or perhaps parallel in the thinking of certain Catholics.

It is on this "law of liberty" concept of conscience that Pope Pius XII commented in a searching and significant radio broadcast made on "Family Day," March 24, 1952, when he talked on *Conscience and Education*. Although delivered directly to Italy, the talk was a commentary on the most urgent aspect

of the general problem of conscience in the present revolutionary transition from an age of individualism to an age of new, potentially good, potentially unfortunate, communal emphasis. It is the problem of the formation of the just and objectively justified conscience.

For Pope Pius XII conscience is:

that which is deepest and most intrinsic in man. . . . the innermost and most secret nucleus in man. It is there that he takes refuge with his spiritual faculties in absolute solitude: alone with himself, or, rather, alone with God—Whose voice sounds in conscience—and with himself. There it is that he decides for good or evil; there it is that he chooses between the way of victory and that of defeat. . . . Hence conscience, to express it with an image as old as it is fitting, is a sanctuary on the threshold of which all must halt, even, in the case of a child, his father and mother. . . .

How, then, can one talk of the education of conscience? We cannot do otherwise, of course, in the light of the Incarnation and claims of the Word of God in Christ and the consequent Christian obligation in matters of faith and morals to accept the will and the commandments of Christ and to conform one's life to them, *i.e.*, each single act, inner or exterior, which the free human will chooses and decides upon. But what is the spiritual faculty, if not conscience, that, in each particular case, gives guidance to the will so that it may determine its actions in conformity with the divine will? Conscience, the Pope argued, must be the clear reflection of human action's divine pattern.

Therefore, expressions such as 'the judgment of the Christian conscience,' or, 'to judge according to the Christian conscience,' mean this: that the *pattern* of

the ultimate and personal decision for a moral action must be taken from the word and will of Christ. In fact, He is the way, the truth, and the life, not only for all men collectively, but for each single one; the mature man, the child, and the youth.

And so, the formation of the Christian conscience consists, above all, in illuminating the mind with respect to Christ's will, law and way; guiding it, also, so far as this can be done from outside, freely and constantly to execute the divine will. *This is the highest present task of moral education and moral education presupposes authority; it is the first contact between conscience and authority, that of the parent, of the teacher, above all, of those who teach divine law—and of all these within the Church.* Nor is anything more consistent with the traditional Christian concept of conscience. For conscience, as Father Bernard Häring reminds us, since it is not an oracle which draws truth from its own obscure depths, by its very nature seeks illumination and guidance.

God, the ultimate norm, the truth to which every conscience must conform . . . always instructs conscience in accordance with its nature: the natural conscience through the order of nature, the conscience endowed with the supernatural grace of faith through supernatural revelation. Just as it is not alien to natural conscience to draw from the natural revelation expressed in creation and to learn from the natural communities which correspond to it, so it is also 'according to nature' for the believing conscience elevated by grace and steeped in humility to harken to the word of revelation communicated to us in the Church . . . and only one with a totally perverted concept of the real nature and function of conscience could repudiate the infallible

magisterium of the Church in the name of conscience. Only a conscience which itself enjoys creative plenitude of infallibility in its own native right could *a priori* reject as contradictory every intervention of objective authority.

Nor are Catholics yet alone in their sense of urgency concerning the role that authority, and especially the teaching Church, must play in the formation of the enlightened conscience. The Anglican scholar whom we have already cited, Professor Pierce, quoting a traditional Protestant source, argues appositely:

Dreadful consequences are derivable to society . . . [from the use of] a plausible word wrested from its proper sense. It has been imagined that provided men follow the directions of their own 'consciences' they are justified in whatever mode of conduct they may adopt, which (as the term 'conscience' is now too generally understood) is . . . in other words to say that because men are persuaded a thing is right therefore it cannot be wrong. . . .

When men therefore talk of 'liberty of conscience' they would do well to consider whether it is not, as the phrase is now understood, rather a liberty of their own making than any portion of that liberty with which Christ has made them free.

For this reason, Pierce sees the Church as having five main duties, plus the resources for performing them, in connection with that training of personal "choice and conscience" which Pius XII found the urgent need of our civilization. He sees the Church as bound to make herself "the best possible environment" for the formation of conscience, a role of the Church that is no longer served when the concept of the Church evaporates from the notion of Christian community to that of an ecclesiastical center visited from

time to time for ritualistic observances, conceived as strictly private duties. He speaks of the spiritual manner in which the Church must influence the secular environment in which her members have to live, since this, too, shapes conscience; he describes the teaching responsibility on specific moral questions which the Church has, beyond her general witness to the truth, and how she must set before her members, and anyone else who will listen, the relevant facts on these specific issues, beginning with the great truths of revelation and the doctrines necessary to salvation, but including also the wisdom of her own experience, which is the sum of that of her countless members plus the corporate insight that comes from her immemorial dialogue with the cultural, political and religious systems of all humanity. Above all—and here the Anglican echoes Pope Pius—she must proclaim not only the teachings of Christ, but His life-giving Person as the pattern to be emulated, making the influence of everything Christ *said* and *did* and *was* penetrate the deepest depths of human intellectual, appetitive, instinctive and emotional life where conscience stirs. Mindful that conscience can, while still claiming the name of conscience, be lulled, anesthetized, even deadened, the Church has the duty to seek the development in all her children of a moral sensitivity so acute that conscience would not merely react negatively to deviation from Christian perfection, but impel positively toward personal perfection, social reform and the building of the Kingdom of God.

Greater appreciation of this latter office of the Church in the formation of conscience would offset the temptation to

pretend that the claims of authority to obedience have so stifled the initiative and freedom of devout consciences as to diminish the effectiveness of the Gospel and the Church. But Father Danielou proclaims the authentically heroic understanding of true obedience when he writes:

Christianity would have had greater influence on social institutions if we had always had the courage to show that obedience to God, as an absolute duty, affects man's whole temporal, political, professional and family life. If Christians have not been more revolutionary, it is not because they lacked freedom but because they have not been sufficiently obedient This is problem number one and it involves fully relating conscience to authority, above all, the authority of God. How?¹¹

The answer to Father Danielou's "How?" is largely found in the study and experience behind Cardinal Newman's final judgment on the part of the Church in the formation of a Christian conscience. Newman was excruciatingly aware of the need for objective criteria for evaluating the dictates of conscience and no small part of his life was a search for such criteria in what pertained to the basic moral act, the act of faith. He could not find such criteria in unaided nature alone, particularly given the fallen state of man which was, of all dogmas, the one most clear to Newman. Neither could he consider Scripture in itself an adequate objective means to the formation of conscience nor norm for judging its dictates; in Luther's protestation that his conscience was "captive to the Word of God" Newman would find the cry of a sorry captive, indeed, so long as the

Word of God meant merely the letter of Scripture alone; but Newman could find no adequate guide nor objective norm for conscience in tradition or the teachings of the Fathers and it is the point of his life that he could not find the rule of conscience in a National Church. The Universal Catholic Church, he decided, endowed with infallibility and teaching through divinely-appointed channels, must be the spiritual country in which authority brings supernatural doctrine to the direction of that conscience which is the herald of the Natural Law; the Catholic Church alone provides adequate objective criteria for the evaluation of those dictates of the sincere conscience which the upright man is bound to follow.

It would take a book by itself to discuss all that Newman contributes to the concepts of conscience and authority and the relations between the two. Brother F. James Kaiser, presently a professor at La Salle College in Philadelphia, has written just such a book, with special reference to the relationship of these to Newman's personal faith.¹²

Mr. Garry Wills, in a book entitled *Politics and Catholic Freedom*, is indebted to Newman for many premises of his own argument on the role of conscience in the complex political area of urgent contemporary interest which his book explores. My hypothetical book will devote a chapter to Newman because no modern writer, probably no Catholic writer at any time has shed such clear light on conscience and authority nor brought such tested practical qualifications to their doctrinal discussion. More-

¹¹ DANIELOU, *THE CHRISTIAN TODAY* ch. 3.

¹² KAISER, *THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE ACCORDING TO JOHN HENRY NEWMAN* (1958).

over, in Newman's day there had long been rife the religious and political disorders resulting from polarization of moral theory around individual conscience, almost in a vacuum of moral solipsism. But by the same token, Newman's generation was beginning to feel the stirrings of the renewed universal aspiration and new social movements, theological and political, of which our generation is witnessing the developments in Christendom and in the world community.

To these John Henry Newman was sensitive, particularly in what pertains to their relationship to personal conscience, to authority and to the deepest theological nature of the Church. On these points alone, a good case can be made for Bishop Robert J. Dwyer's description of Newman as the "absent Council Father" of Vatican II. Bishop Dwyer, noting that Newman has been cited in the Council more frequently than any other authority, not excepting St. Thomas, finds his influence everywhere pervasive, especially in problems associated with the development of Christian doctrine. He declares that Newman's spirit must inevitably be present in the Council's final decisions; one prays this will be particularly true on questions of conscience and authority.

My chapter on Newman will have to point out that the English scholar, although the eager and unmistakable champion of conscience, was no partisan of "modern conscience" nor of moral liberalism. Like C.A. Pierce among recent Protestants and Bishop De Smedt in the Catholic Council, Newman must include in his defense of the rights of conscience a repudiation of its caricatures and

counterfeits. He exposes the scientific and literary efforts to be rid of conscience entirely, the

resolute warfare . . . against that spiritual, invisible influence which is too subtle for science and too profound for literature. . . . As in Roman times, and in the middle age, its supremacy was assailed by the arm of physical force, so now the intellect is put in operation to sap the foundations of a power which the sword could not destroy. We are told that conscience is but a twist in primitive and untutored man; that its dictate is an imagination; that the very notion of guiltiness, which that dictate enforces, is simply irrational, for how can there possibly be freedom of will, how can there be consequent responsibility, in that infinite eternal network of cause and effect in which we helplessly lie? And what retribution have we to fear when we have had no real choice to do good or evil? ¹³

Then he sketches the present "notion of conscience . . . in the popular mind." The sketch is still life-like after a century:

There, no more than in the intellectual world, does 'conscience' retain the old, true, Catholic meaning of the word. There too the idea, the presence of a Moral Governor is far away from the use of it, frequent and emphatic as that use of it is. When men 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. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one's leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or

¹³ NEWMAN, CERTAIN DIFFICULTIES FELT BY ANGLICANS IN CATHOLIC TEACHING 249 (1898).

writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he likes it, in his own way. 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. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this 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.*¹⁴

But for Newman himself, beginning in his earliest Anglican days, conscience was a cognitive and affective act of profoundly theological overtones, God-centered, God-sanctioned, sensitive and responsible to God above all else. It involved the faculties by which man discovers God and pleases God.

From Newman's Anglican sermons, Brother Kaiser draws a total picture of the great preacher's view of the positive role of enlightened conscience in leading man to the point where authority, especially that of revelation, can work on a conscience illumined by grace to bring one to the highest religious knowledge and security.

This view goes far beyond the mere "accusing conscience" concept. He who faithfully follows the promptings of his conscience, his sense of right and wrong, Newman insists, will arrive at objective religious truth disposed to accept it and live by it. Brother Kaiser summarizes

from Newman's Oxford preaching five propositions setting forth this matter so vital to Newman. They are: (1) conscience consists in an habitual orientation of the whole man to God; (2) conscience develops in man a profound awareness of the presence of God; (3) conscience implies that a man desires to serve God with a perfect heart; (4) this orientation to God and perfect service will be manifested by consistency in conduct; (5) finally, conscience imposes the duty of habitual obedience.

It is here, in Newman's argument, that conscience, properly understood, enters the orbit of authority, not less properly understood, indeed cries out for its guiding help. It is here, too, that we become keenly aware of why the English Cardinal of the Vatican Council I period would second arguments of those in Vatican Council II who argue that nothing will better serve the case for the *doctrinal authority* of supernatural Catholicism than a clear, unequivocal defense of the case for the *moral authority* of natural conscience. How promptly would Newman have perceived the implications, in terms of the future of the faith, as well as of the premises of justice and decency, behind that proposition in Pope John's *Pacem in Terris* which the captious seem disposed to debate as if it were somehow rash or offensive to pious ears: "Every human being has the right to honor God according to the dictates of an upright conscience. . . ."

One of Cardinal Newman's deepest convictions and dearest consolations was that his own life-story ("I have not sinned against the light!") proved how habitual obedience to such an upright (even er-

¹⁴ *Id.* at 250.

roneous) conscience eventually leads to objective truth; that those who act according to the light of conscience are increasingly rewarded with greater light. He saw evidence of this everywhere in sacred history, but his reflections on the case of St. Paul are particularly revealing in view of his own conscientious attacks on Catholicism during his Anglican days. Newman considered that Paul differed from other enemies of Christ in this, that he kept a clear conscience and habitually obeyed according to his knowledge. "Missing the great truth that Jesus was the Christ, he persecuted the Christians; but though his conscience was ill-informed, and that by his own fault, yet he obeyed it such as it was." Hence Paul's progress from error to faith, his conversion from hate to love.

In connection with the relation of authority to conscience, the case of Saul-turned-Paul was also instructive to Newman:

God speaks to us in two ways, in our heart and in His Word. The latter and greater of these informants St. Paul knew little of; the former he could not but know in his measure (for it was within him), and he obeyed it. That inward voice was but feeble, mixed up and obscured with human feelings and human traditions; so that what his conscience told him to do, was but partially true and in part wrong. Yet still, believing it to speak God's will, he deferred to it, acting as he would afterwards when he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision which informed him Jesus was the Christ.¹⁵

Again, then, conscience and authority not merely admit of reconciliation, they demand one another.

The general sense of right and wrong, which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressed by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its flight . . . this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the hierarchy are in the divine purpose the supply of an urgent demand.¹⁶

But however "obscured" and "unsteady" conscience may be, it is still, says Newman, "a messenger from Him Who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. [It] is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ. . . ." Hence authority depends on conscience not only for the holy exercise of its claims; it depends on conscience for the very acceptance of these. The authority, that of the Pope included, which would be unmindful of conscience or hold it in contempt would be suicidal; destructive of itself; but the conscience, even otherwise enlightened, which would not recognize its need of authority, above all the teaching authority in the Church, would be similarly destructive of its own purposes.

Newman's greatest apologetic task ultimately became to reconcile the natural "aboriginal Vicar of Christ" which is conscience with the supernaturally established Vicar of Christ in the Church. So far as infallible teaching is concerned, this presented no difficulty; but in specific decisions in the *practical* order, including those of a political nature posited by Gladstone in his reactions to the decrees of the First Vatican Council, Newman concedes that "there are extreme cases in which conscience may come into collision

¹⁵ 2 NEWMAN, PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN SERMONS 103-04.

¹⁶ NEWMAN, *op. cit. supra* note 13, at 253-54.

with the word of a Pope," but he has little difficulty establishing from Catholic philosophical, theological, conciliar and, indeed, papal arguments that in such a case conscience is to be followed in spite of that (papal) word.

Newman's detailed analysis of this problem of possible practical conflict between conscience and authority is the content of his historic *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*; it is a classic contribution to the all time literature on the question and it remains required reading for any with lingering misgivings about the direct doctrinal point defined in Vatican Council I or the indirect political corollaries implied by Gladstone. (I once had a first edition of Newman's *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, but I loaned it to a young Congressman from Massachusetts who thought he should study up on this controversy in case he ever campaigned for the Presidency; he won the Presidency, but I lost the book!)

Newman's quip, for such it was, about the order of the toasts he could drink to conscience and to the Pope takes its force from the fact that neither he nor Gladstone were concerned, at this juncture, with papal infallibility or with Church teaching at all. They are talking about the moral freedom of a Catholic to serve his country according to his conscience. This freedom of conscience, Newman maintains, can never be in conflict with the infallibility of the Pope, because conscience is not a judgment upon any speculative truth or abstract doctrine, but bears immediately on conduct, something to be done or not done, *here and now*, and in which, by hypothesis, the Pope might give a specific order or seek

to impose a practical decision which an individual conscience found unacceptable. Newman's conclusion that a positive and clear dictate of a man's conscience regarding some act to be performed or omitted must be obeyed rather than an opposing precept of a superior is no less orthodox than that of St. Thomas Aquinas in the same matter. It must necessarily follow from the Catholic concept of conscience, as Newman mischievously quotes against the British Prime Minister, defended by the Fourth Lateran Council and by the celebrated Spanish Carmelites of Salamanca.

Just as Newman's interior life prepared him to speak with grateful insight of the role of conscience, so his career in the Church prepared him to speak realistically as well as reverently of authority, its divine role and its human, sometimes galling limitations. No one has preached more eloquently than he that "men, not angels, are the ministers of the Gospel," and few have had more acute personal experiences to add feeling to their preaching. But his view of the Church, as also his view of history and the providence of God, enabled him to see occasional evil, including discomfort of spirit, as indispensable in the hammering out of truth and the achievement of good. That view the Cardinal set forth in a superb description of the Catholic interplay of conscience and authority:

Catholic Christendom is no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but presents a continuous picture of authority and private judgment alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide;—it is a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the

beauty and the majesty of a superhuman Power,—into what may be called a large reformatory or training-school, not as if into a hospital or into a prison, not in order to be sent to bed, not to be buried alive, but (if I may change my metaphor) brought together as if into some moral factory, for the melting, refining, and moulding, by an incessant, noisy process, of the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purpose.¹⁷

A book of reflections on conscience and authority must perforce include a chapter on the sentimental, political and psychological pressures all but irresistibly at work on Thomas More to persuade him to take the oath so lightly taken by his lesser (which means almost all) contemporaries.

Thomas More sat with his conscience for fifteen lonely months in the Tower of London, . . . isolated from the other prisoners, forbidden his beloved books, deprived finally of even pen and paper. But neither his conscience nor his writing hand lagged. He scrawled last messages to his family with charcoal ('. . . that we may merrily meet in heaven') and went to his death proclaiming that he died 'the King's good servant, but God's first.'¹⁸

It is, indeed, a lonely picture, as is that of the martyr to conscience always and everywhere. But a devout humanist, like More, understood better than any other that the very nature of the informed Christian conscience is that it never leaves one spiritually isolated nor intellectually alone. For the invisible wall of Christian conscience closes compactly around its possessor a host of rare spirits that no prison wall can close out, "the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live

again in minds made better by their presence."

John Lancaster Spalding described the companions of Father Delp in his Nazi prison; of Father Perrin in the concentration camp; and the spiritual company of the physically isolated Thomas More when he wrote: "If I am left alone, yet God and all the heroic dead are with me still."

Nor is the man of conscience without joy. To no man more than Thomas More could à Kempis' words apply: "Have a good conscience and thou shalt ever have gladness. A good conscience may bear right many things and rejoices among adversities."

For More illustrates (as R.W. Chambers' biography and Robert Bolt's play unforgettably demonstrate) precisely the basic issues in any conflict between conscience and authority. Conscience in the most exemplary Catholic sense was the core of his character; it was the heart of his sanctity, of his tragedy and of the eternal triumph of this urbane humanist of resolute, informed conscience.

But if my book gives a chapter to him as the witness unto death of the things we have been considering—conscience, authority and both within the Church—it must give another to a not less shining example of these. I refer, of course, to St. Joan of Arc, whose memory for reasons historical, theological and perhaps sentimental, I must cherish precisely because I am a bishop, that is: one bound by conscience, charged with authority and tied by great love to the Church. Jean Guitton, the first of the lay auditors admitted to Vatican Council II, has promised a book precisely on these aspects of

¹⁷ NEWMAN, *APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA* (1865).

¹⁸ Sign, Jan. 1964, p. 20.

the haunting case of St. Joan.¹⁹ No case in twenty centuries presents so dramatically nor in such brutal completeness the most extreme anguish of the conflict between conscience and authority. No others ever caught in this conflict, certainly not Galileo and most certainly not any usually cited as "modern Galileos," hold a candle light of moral splendor to the solar brilliance with which St. Joan illumines the Catholic concept of martyrdom for conscience sake.

Joan's testimony at Rouen is perclucid evidence of the clarity of her conscience and the correctness of its relation to duly constituted authority, and all this within the Church, whose true nature she perceived with a lucidity amazing in view not merely of her lack of formal education but of the superficial understanding of this mystery in even her most sophisticated contemporaries, her judges included.

It is precisely for this reason that Jacques Maritain, in a moving recent essay, describes Jean Bréhal's brief in Joan's behalf as the most important theological document in her rehabilitation trial. Bréhal underscored that, for Joan, when an order clearly comes from God, no human superior can place an obstacle in its way; her understanding of this was strictly in the pattern of St. Thomas and no badgering of judges or baiting of cross-examiners could shake her from her repeated affirmations of this premise of her entire position. She said she submitted gladly to all constituted authority in the Church, to the Pope, to other prelates, God being first served; she said that in all her words and all her deeds she gladly

sought to follow the Church, even, as she understood it, the Church Militant, just so it commanded nothing impossible, explaining that by this she meant only that it would be impossible to deny what God had commanded. "What God commands (her very phrasing is almost that of St. Thomas) I shall not desist from doing for any man alive, nor for any thing there is." In this, Bréhal argues, there is not a shadow of fault; such words are morality itself.

Maritain then drives home the point. It is impossible that the Universal Church, infallibly guided by the Holy Spirit—as is no single prelate nor any particular sub-grouping of prelates—or that the Pope acting as Chief Shepherd and Teacher of the Universal Church should ever impose a commandment contrary to that of God.

What, then, is the word "Church" doing in the adversative position to the word "conscience" in which Joan was so brutally crushed? Jean Bréhal, within the lifetime of Joan's mother and those who watched Joan die, gives the answer:

Among all the equivocations (in the questions put to her), one of them is particularly tricky and it recurs constantly (in the trial). They kept repeating that she should submit all her statements and her deeds to the judgment of the Church. So far as this might mean the Universal Church (the Church itself) and the Sovereign Pontiff, Joan never failed to declare her readiness to submit; but in their way of understanding it, (to her judges and accusers) *the Church was themselves; sed ad eorum intellectum de seipsis hoc intendebant. . . .*

In brief, her judges did not think of themselves as merely the human wielders of authority; they thought of themselves

¹⁹ Cf. THE GUITTON JOURNALS (1963)..

as the authority, as the Church itself. There, comments Maritain, in all its depth, is the drama that involved St. Joan. It is clear that the judges of Rouen and the learned Doctors of the University of Paris lacked an integral, living theology of what the Church is, of what conscience is in the Church and of what authority is in the Church—and, as a result, of what lies on the consciences of those who hold authority in the Church. Joan, untutored, caught the point of the nature of the Church by an instinct of faith and a grace of the Holy Spirit, and she clung to it in spite of every threat they made or trap they set. So, she pinpointed with peasant directness the human wielder of authority responsible for her tragedy: “Bishop, I die through you!” It is a precise accusation that must haunt all in authority forever; but it is without hate and so precise as to be without a trace of anti-clericalism and, above all, with full love of the Church. For Joan knew that there was a sense in which she, too, was the Church and when she appealed to a Church Council dimly she discerned, I think, the Council called by Pope John. With the passing centuries we are slowly returning to that pristine Christian understanding of the Church that Joan, meanwhile had, “the Church of the Incarnate Word,” described in the very title of Monsignor Charles Journet’s book (“so necessary for our times, too,” as Maritain notes), to the implications of which for conscience and authority alike the present Council will doubtless bring luminous moral, ascetical and dogmatic insights.

And so, his close attention to the debates within the Council hall on the con-

cept of the Church should greatly help Jean Guitton to write the book which he promises to justify his claim that ours is “the age of Joan.” He means by this, I suppose, that ours is an age of great deference—must we not even say, in all honesty, of sometimes mistaken deference—to individual conscience; it is an age, alternately, of excessive expressions and excessive rejections of authority; above all, it is an age looking for terms in which it can express a dawning new love for the Church, a love such, as I think, as the twenty Christian centuries to date have not yet seen and precisely because it is sensed that in the Church and in the Church alone are reconciled human conscience made divine and divine authority made humane.

St. Joan has so much to teach us about the claims of conscience, the pitfalls of authority and why the Church, one with Christ, is supremely to be loved, no matter what. Joan reminds us that neither conscience nor authority amount to anything, in final terms, except as means to an end greater than either or both, and that end is neither the freedom that conscience claims nor the order that authority imposes, but it is the sanctity to which conscience must bind us and authority must serve. Joan reminds us that the Church is on the side of conscience and canonizes those who follow it; the Church is on the side of authority and commands those who exercise it; but the Church is, above all, the kingdom of *sanctity* and to *sanctity* everything, conscience and authority and all else, is utterly subordinate.

Those who realize this have found their way to the very heart of the Catholic

faith; everything else is at the periphery. That is why Bernanos, writing of the clash between the conscience of Joan and the authority of her judges, loses little time on analysis or rehearsal of the evil of the clash, but devotes his whole time, as Joan would wish, to the lesson of the good that hallows the otherwise harrowing business. *Ours is the Church of the Saints*. Who, reading of Joan, fails to see this and to crave to be at one with her? Is there one who would really wish to spend his life, like her canonist judges, pondering the problem of evil rather than dashing forward with her, the saint? To be a saint, what bishop would not give his ring, his mitre and his crosier? What Cardinal would not give his purple; what Pope his white robe, his chamberlains, his Swiss Guard, and all his temporal power? The whole vast machinery of wisdom, experience, discipline, power and majesty, is of itself nothing unless it is animated by love and productive of sanctity.

From the Pope down to the little altar boy draining the wine left over in the cruets, everyone knows that there are not many famous preachers in the Ordo, not many priest-diplomatists (though there are some, mind you!). *Ours is the Church of the Saints*. We may respect the Commissariat Service, the Provost Marshal, the staff officers and the cartographers, but our hearts are with those who get killed. *Ours is the Church of the Saints*.

Joan has other things to teach us and these, too, Jean Guitton promises to develop in his book. He suggests that Joan is not only the saint of conscience, but she is specifically the saint of *conscience impelling one to vocation*, a vocation

within the Church, even though often involving tension with the institutional side of the Church and, therefore perhaps, with authority.

This makes ours "the age of Joan" in yet another dimension, since in our age the very sense of *vocation* has grown tenuous and vague, almost in proportion as conscience, for all the talk about its freedom and its sovereignty, has become more and more divorced from the voice of God. A whole literature is growing up around this subject, thank God, and its emphasis is happily on the relationship of *vocation to personal liberty* and of *both to enlightened conscience*.

Bernard Shaw links St. Joan to all this in one of the most perceptive sections of the preface to his provocative play. For Shaw, Joan exemplifies the conflict between genius and discipline, by which he means the conflict between *vocation* and *institution* as one aspect of the conflict between conscience and authority. Jean Guitton's preface to Maurice Bellet's *Vocation en Liberté* leads me to hope that his promised book on St. Joan will make Shaw's point profitable to our generation in the life of the Church, in political society, in science and in the service of every aspect of truly humane culture.

And so my final chapter shall provide reflections on vocation, including the vocation of an organization like this, and the vocation of publications like *The Critic*. I think it possible that from time to time in this quarter century of its existence *The Critic* and its publishers may have had momentary occasion to run afoul of authority, near or far, greater or less. It is just possible that claims of conscience have been sometimes involved

in such collisions; so, I think it likely, have been claims of authority. But the pursuit of vocation, whether clerical or lay, always presupposes dictates of conscience and sooner or later brings one into collision with one or another form of authority. Sometimes it is the authority of God, impelling one to the vocation of a needed but unattractive work. Sometimes it is the authority of parents, resisting a vocation to priesthood, to marriage or to one of those harebrained ventures which so frequently turn out to the good name of the family and the glory of God. Increasingly in our day it is the authority of the State, seeking to regulate our vocations, sometimes through work authoritatively imposed (as in compulsory military service) and sometimes through the impersonal requirements of the Planned Society, rightist, leftist or secular democratic. This may easily prove the great source of collision in an age of technocracy.

See how pertinent, therefore, to the concept of *vocation*, which is, in turn, so pertinent to the vitality of human culture as well as of the Church, is this question of conscience and authority. See how important it is that conscience and authority be harmoniously related, but that neither be annihilated.

In fact, not only must each be strong, but the synchronizing of both must still leave a tension between them. In the dynamic society, and the Church must always be such, there is a *tension* as well as a *harmony* between the liberty that, unchecked, could degenerate into chaos and the control that, unchecked, could freeze into despotism. Hence in the Church, where the basic relations are in

order and both forces are strong, we shall not regret the occasional painful stresses and perhaps embarrassing strains which reveal that the tension between individual conscience and collective authority is at work. Quite the contrary: we shall rejoice in the evidence this gives of organic vitality, recognizing not only that the tension remains even after the two forces are harmoniously reconciled but that tension is essential to the harmony itself.

This truth has its parallel everywhere. It is symbolized in the "basic dualism" that Curt Sachs finds at work in the world of art where the to and fro of shaping trends of perfection depends on two ideals alternately acting as magnetic poles. Sometimes this polarity and tension in art is set forth in metaphor from physics; then it is termed "static-dynamic." Sometimes the antonyms are described as the Greeks expressed them in terms of *ethos* and *pathos*. There is a tension underlying the harmonies of music, where the order of rules is imposed on the spontaneity of sound. Biology reveals the "balance of nature"; a certain tension is everywhere in art and life or there is no harmony and no health.

So for moral health, whether in the person or in society, a certain tension is as inevitable and necessary as we saw authority itself and the impulse of conscience to be. It is in fostering and forming both, in the guidance it gives to conscience and the controls it imposes on authority, with the arising from their mutual interplay, that Holy Church gives glory to God, makes its greatest contribution to civilization and gives our vocations to each of you and, for that matter, to the likes of me.