

## **What Is Conscience and How Does It Work?**

by Dr. John Young and Br. Dunstan Robidoux OSB

Loneragan Institute for the “Good Under Construction” © 2025

Some Introductory Remarks: Newman, Aquinas, Lonergan

With respect to conscience in terms of what the Church teaches about it, no magisterial document specifically or solely deals with conscience, explaining exactly what it is. References to conscience abound in different contexts: for example, in catechisms since, if questions about conscience arise, conscience will have to be talked about. Is it right to do this? Is it right to do that? How to decide? How to determine? Conscience needs to be identified in terms of what it is and how it exists and how we are related to it although, whatever the teaching that is given, it will be a teaching which reflects or draws from a tradition of philosophical and theological reflection. To be noted is the fact that, in a way, conscience resembles time: the difficulty we have in talking about time. St. Augustine had noted that, though we think that we know what time is, when we sit down and try and talk about it, we find that we do not really know for sure what it is. Mysterious. Similarly, I would say the same thing about conscience. We think that we know what it is until we have to explain to ourselves and others exactly what it is.

As a point of departure: a survey of the writings of Cardinal John Henry Newman, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Bernard Lonergan reveals an articulation and way of speaking that distinguishes three different senses of conscience which can be understood to exist as stages: a preliminary reality that belongs to conscience is then sublated by a heightening of conscience which exists if, first, we turn to the principle of natural law, and then, later, to religious teachings that come to us from the data of revelation by means of the teaching authority of the Magisterium which belongs to the Catholic Church. More often than not, we tend to begin with some kind of religious faith before we get into an analysis which is allegedly natural to the degree that it would seem to imply that we are working with an understanding which differs or which is separated from apprehension of meaning that can be said to be religious.

First then, Newman distinguishes conscience as a divine law that is imprinted into us as creatures. In other words, since, as human beings, we do not create our own existence; since we exist as created beings, in some way, the intelligibility that belongs to our Creator, as first principle, is imprinted into us as creatures: into the intelligibility that belongs to us as creatures and into the intelligibility that distinguishes us apart from all other kinds of created being. If, in God as Creator, an intelligibility exists as a rule or norm, in us as God's creatures, something of God as Creator exists in us as the intelligibility of God as Creator. This intelligibility that we participate in (in our way), exists as a rule or norm to tell us when something is not right, if something is wrong. Certain things, certain actions, are congruent; they fit in; they are appropriate to who and what we are as human beings; but other things, other actions, are not so congruent. They do not fit. Hence, simply in how we exist as human beings, even if we are untutored and untrained, in some strange and mysterious way, who and what we

are points to what is right and what is wrong: the difference between right and wrong. With Newman, we can refer to this conscience as the voice of God as it exists in us in obviously a mediated, indirect way. As Newman quotes from Aquinas: “the natural law is an impression of the Divine Light in us, a participation of the eternal law in the rational creature.” Citing a text from Vatican II *Gaudium et spes*: “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.” If we should speak about the essence of conscience, we can speak about a drive within us toward our self-transcendence (a drive that is rooted deep within our very being). It is a drive that is realized in creative understanding, critical judging, responsible deciding, and generous loving. Responding positively to this drive keeps us moving forward in an ongoing kind of adventure: being human and becoming more fully human. Insight takes us beyond sensory experience toward understanding; critical judgment takes us beyond mere ideas toward what is really so, reality; responsibility takes us beyond acting on the basis of what is agreeable or disagreeable toward seeking and acting upon what is truly worthwhile and good; love takes us beyond acting out of a sense of mere responsibility toward gladly giving of ourselves in service to others. Love is sacrifice.

Second, Newman distinguishes conscience that has been trained and cultivated in some way: brought into forms of actuation that suppose some kind of development as this has arisen within the life of us as human beings. Hence, in this context, St. Thomas Aquinas speaks about “conscience [as]...the mind of man passing moral judgments.” We refer to judgment as an essentially rational act which exists within an order which supposes other prior acts and also a kind of openness which exists within human beings in terms of an attunement to things which exist externally. They are other than the being of any given individual. “Conscience exists as the practical judgment or dictate of reason, by which we judge what here and now is to be done as being good, or to be avoided as evil.” It is not to be identified with the “right of self-will” (quoting Newman). About conscience, Bernard Lonergan speaks of it as centered on the “idea of value, the notion of value” where, by notion, we refer to an intending and not to a knowing. Three parts or stages are to be distinguished. We begin with the intending, with questions: “Is this worth while? It is truly good? Is it really important?” A second step refers to an act of understanding: apprehending a value about that which could be really good as we distinguish between feelings that are self-regarding with feelings and emotions which exist in a self-transcending kind of way. Some feelings (our emotions, our affectivity) prompt us to act on the basis of our likes and dislikes, our desires and fears. Others prompt us to go beyond ourselves and to seek what is truly worthwhile and good: truth, beauty, excellence, noble deeds, respect for individual persons, love, destiny. Lastly, a third step: judging if an apprehended value is a true or decent value. The order of conscience reflects an order which exists within the order of our human cognition. Hence, conscience exists as the fruit of our human development and an order of many causes and elements. An informed, formed conscience, as we have noted, as we have suggested, is to be distinguished from a conscience that is lacking in training, insight, and formation. A formed conscience enjoys a priority and an

importance which inherently belongs to it. Conscience *per se* or mere conscience does not exist as an absolute if we should compare it to the being of a formed, intelligent, enlightened conscience. Not any kind of conscience will do although, at the same time however, Aquinas tells us that we are compelled to move or act in the wake of what our conscience is telling us even if it should or could be the case that our judgement is wrong in the context of a particular judgement that we are making. If we are honest with ourselves and are willing to question ourselves, in due time, we will come to realize that, in a given situation, we have erred in our judgment. We can apologize; we can repent; we can engage in acts of compensation and restitution. Think, for an example, about the case of Socrates. He would ask many questions and, in this way, help others come to understand that something is not right in how they are thinking and acting. We best begin with an insight which acknowledges the extent of our ignorance. A truly wise man realizes that, in fact, there are many things about which he is ignorant. Better to suffer from injustice than to be unjust to others. To act, to respond with injustice to injustice is to add to the sum and momentum of human misery and grief.

Third, conscience exists as a form of human deliberation and as an inner norm which is actuated or which is grounded in the truths of religious faith and formation. We refer to something that is guided by the Church with respect to her teaching since, among us as human beings, we can experience an insufficiency which belongs to the kind of light and understanding which comes to us from the practice of our critical human reason: the insufficiency of the light of our created human reason. Hence, to help this reason, to bring it toward insights about our being and the truth of things, the Church exists as a source of supernatural light: telling us things about God that we cannot otherwise know if we should try to live in a way that is somehow apart from God, which gives to God but scant heed. God as our Creator differs from God as our Redeemer (even as one builds on the other) since, as Redeemer, from God through the mediation of His Church, we come to know about things which exist as an order and plan of salvation and redemption. For instance, we can refer to the meaning of Christ's saving death on the cross. On the basis of Christ's self-sacrifice, the Church teaches us about how it is possible to bring good out of evil. Only God is able to create an order of things where, from failure, comes success; good from evil; being from absence of being. A different way exists for us to live (to think about), and this way of salvation and healing encourages us to accept the pain and the injustice of our human suffering as a basis for moving toward a higher viewpoint which exists in terms of forgiveness and charity. We respond to the evil of the world by a kind of accepting of suffering that we join to Christ's suffering as an act of love to be at one with Him and so we cease to become originators and causes of injustice, suffering, and pain that, so easily, we can mete out to other people.

If we are to speak about a criterion for conscience, we best speak about self-transcendence: the extent of the self-transcendence which exists in us: getting beyond ourselves; if, in fact, we are succeeding in getting beyond ourselves, moving toward the things of God.