

A Reflection on Conscience

Saint Thomas More: A Man for our Times

“Although I know well, Margaret, that because of my past wickedness I deserve to be abandoned by God, I cannot but trust in his merciful goodness. His grace had strengthened me until now and made me content to lose goods, land, and life as well, rather than to swear against my conscience. God’s grace has given the king a gracious frame of mind toward me, so that as yet he has taken from me nothing but my liberty. In doing this His Majesty has done me such a great good with respect to spiritual profit that I trust that among all the great benefits he has heaped so abundantly upon me I count my imprisonment the very greatest. I cannot, therefore, mistrust the grace of God.”¹

These words, written by Saint Thomas More from his prison cell in the Tower of London where he was held for fifteen months during 1534-1535 before his martyrdom, bespeak the earnest struggle of a man who confronted attempts by king and country to intimidate him. More did everything in his power to defend his stance of conscience against King Henry VIII, who demanded of all his subjects an oath acknowledging himself not only as sovereign ruler of England but also as leader of the Church.² Not considering himself courageous enough for great martyrdom, Saint Thomas More prayed fervently for grace and the courage to remain faithful to his conscience in the face of great intimidations. Firm faith and trust in God, fostered by years of study, prayer and preparation for spiritual combat, contributed to his persevering stance in the face of great adversity.

In our world today, conscience has been reduced to superficial consciousness and subjectivity that enslave man to prevailing opinions and rationalization.³ Conscience no longer points to the innermost heart of man⁴ where he hears God speak and where man makes choices in reference to the Supreme Good that draws us all toward our final end and goal. Each of us has been created to seek truth and goodness and choose acts in accord with this law written in our hearts. In the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Saint Thomas Aquinas writes that, inherent in our dignity as human beings endowed with reason and free will, we are ultimately created for God Himself and ordered to this Supreme Good as our ultimate end. “[T]he end which God intends is God Himself. Therefore, the divine law principally looks to the ordering of man toward God.”⁵ Only in seeking his divine end can man find true freedom. One of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium and Spes*, enjoins us:

¹ Saint Thomas More. From a letter written in prison to his daughter, Margaret. From the English Works of Sir Thomas More, London: 1557, pp. 1454.

² Wegemer, Gerald B. *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage*. Princeton: Scepter Publishers, 1995.

³ Ratzinger, Joseph. *On Conscience*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2007, pp 21.

⁴ Newman, John Henry. *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997, pp 1102.

⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Translated by Vernon J Bourke. New York: Image Books, 1956, pp 124.

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.⁶

The virtue of prudence “disposes practical reason to discern out true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.”⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas quotes Aristotle in his discussion of prudence: “prudence is right reason applied to action...a prudent man is one who is capable of taking good counsel.”⁸ Prudence is not just habit, but a conscious act that guides other virtues and the judgment of conscience. Prudence originates, and is fostered, by teaching, and demands experience and time. Prudence consists not in knowledge alone but requires the exercise of “acts”⁹ and increases toward perfection. Graces abound to aid us in the pursuit of the virtuous life and to follow God's call to love goodness and reject evil. To avail ourselves of these abundant graces, we need to frequent the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist and to engage in personal and communal prayer asking for illumination of intellect and strengthening of will.

Formation of conscience requires the knowledge of truth and an understanding of God as our ultimate end. Lifelong study of Sacred Scripture, embracing wisdom and the practice of the interior law written on the heart of man aid in growth in virtue. Spurred on by the witness of the saints and the counsel and example of others who live virtuous lives, we seek to always choose acts of goodness and to form habits that make us more amenable to know truth, adhere to it, and allow it to permeate and direct our lives.¹⁰

Prudence is needed in forming conscience and developing virtues. Yet conscience sometimes goes astray through ignorance or when blinded by the habit of sin. When conscience is mistaken and narrowed to subjective truth, man is being led by ignorance and can become enslaved to his passions, such as fear, anger, hatred, or sorrow.

As persons created with reason and free will, we are “impelled by nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek truth, especially religious truth.”¹¹ Personal responsibility demands adherence to truth once it is discovered. Without religious freedom, man cannot fulfill this

⁶ Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press 1992. *Gaudium and Spes* 16.

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church. New York: Doubleday, 1995, paragraph 1806.

⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* II-II, 47, 2. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992. *Dignitatis Humanae*, paragraph 2.

¹¹ Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992. *Dignitatis Humanae*, paragraph 2.

obligation to search for truth and follow his well-formed conscience so that he might come to God. Religious freedom ensures that all men will be immune from coercion by individuals or groups, and upholds the principle that “nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters.”¹² Invited by God to participate in His divine law—“eternal, objective and universal, by which God orders, directs, and governs the whole world and the ways of the human community according to a plan conceived in his wisdom and love”—each human person innately longs to arrive at a deeper knowledge of unchangeable truth and to form an apt conscience that may instruct the free, voluntary acts by which man directs himself toward God. Religious freedom is not founded just upon some persons’ subjective beliefs or attitudes, but on the inherent dignity of every person, which remains even when the person neglects his responsibility to seek truth.

In his struggle to live in accord with his well-formed conscience, Saint Thomas More was not seeking martyrdom; quite the contrary: “Thomas More, for whom conscience was not at all an expression of subjective stubbornness or obstinate heroism...numbered himself, in fact, among those faint-hearted martyrs who only after faltering and much questioning succeed in mustering up obedience to conscience.”¹³ In the years leading up to his imprisonment and death, as the tenor of the political scene in England was changing, he dynamically defended objective truth and skillfully attempted to inform other consciences about the disastrous effects upon persons and society of subjective truth and social conformism. He vigorously withstood intimidation, loss of freedom and material possessions, and finally, in a great act of trust in Divine Truth, he surrendered his life:

“I will not mistrust him, Meg, though I shall feel myself weakening and on the verge of being overcome with fear. I shall remember how Saint Peter at a blast of wind began to sink because of his lack of faith, and I shall do as he did: call upon Christ and pray to him for help. And then I trust he shall place his holy hand on me and in the stormy seas hold me up from drowning. And if he permits me to play Saint Peter further and to fall to the ground and to swear and forswear, may God our Lord in his tender mercy keep me from this, and let me lose if it so happen, and never win thereby! Still, if this should happen, afterward I trust that in his goodness he will look on me with pity as he did upon Saint Peter, and make me stand up again and confess the truth of my conscience afresh and endure here the shame and harm of my own fault. ... And, therefore, my own good daughter, do not let your mind be troubled over anything that shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best.”

May we follow our conscience and choose the best.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ratzinger, Joseph. *On Conscience*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2007, pp 26.