

Chapter 6

Christian Conscience



Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) was the Lord Chancellor of King Henry VIII of England. He was the first layman yet to hold that post. Thomas More was known for his firm faith and clear conscience. He was a reputed statesman and scholar. He refused to endorse King Henry's plan to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon (1527). Soon he resigned in 1532, citing ill-health, but the reason was his disapproval of Henry's stance toward the church. He refused to attend the coronation of Ann Boleyn, in 1533, a matter which did not escape the king's notice. In 1534, Thomas More refused to swear to the Act of Succession and the oath of supremacy. More was 'found guilty of treason' and was beheaded alongside Bishop Fisher on July 06, 1535. More's final words on the scaffold were: "The king's good servant, but God's first." Thomas More was canonized by the Catholic Church, as a saint, by Pope Pius XI, in 1935. He is considered a portrait of courage and an exemplary man of Christian conscience. Thomas More did not fall into temptations of power or wealth or the evil designs of the kings. He stood by his conscience even at the cost of his family and life. He stands tall as a shining example of genuine Christian conscience and his life will serve as an inspiration for all of us. The world always pays its tribute to men who bear bold testimony to truth.

Conscience, the Inner Voice

Conscience is the echo of the Voice of God, a voice within the innermost recess of human heart. Conscience is also considered as the moral compass. Basing on the 16th article of the II Vatican council's pastoral constitution, Church in the Modern world, Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches on Christian conscience as follows: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary.

There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (CCC 1776). The conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary”. Human conscience is the echo of God's voice in his depths. Prophet Isaiah reminds us, “And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying. This is the way; walk in it” (Is 30:21). This is the voice of conscience that is continually guiding us.

Importance of Conscience

Through loyalty to and faithful obedience of conscience, Christians are able to join others in search of truth and right solution to many moral problems that we may face in our lives, both individually and socially,. The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups are guided by the standards of moral conclusions. It is possible that conscience goes astray through ignorance.

Conscience is a judgment of reason where the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he/ she is going to perform, is in the process of performing or has already performed. Man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law. To quote John Henry Newman, “Conscience is a law of the mind; conscience is a messenger of him, who both in nature and in grace speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal vicar of Christ”.

Conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and divine law or an erroneous judgment that departs from them. A true Christian must seriously seek always, what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law. The virtue of prudence, advice of competent people and the help of the Holy Spirit will enlighten him to keep his Christian conscience upright. Man must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he deliberately acts against it, he would condemn himself.

A reasonable decision of the conscience is unbreakable but a decision taken under weak conscience may go wrong. The decision taken by the conscience may be wrong if it is taken due to selfish motives, lack of knowledge of what is good and evil or under pressure of emotions or influence of some external forces etc.

Different types of Conscience (Levels of Conscience)

Human conscience can be classified on the basis of behavior of a person. The levels under which conscience can be described are:

- 1. Sinful Conscience:** when a person does something knowing that the action done is wrong and sinful.

- 2. Perplexed Conscience:** When a person keeps changing his decisions very often and uncertain about what is right and what is wrong.
- 3. Scrupulous Conscience:** when one considers an action done to be sinful where there is no sin at all. He takes insignificant offences as grave and is unnecessarily worried of the same.
- 4. Lax Conscience:** when a person takes a serious offence as silly and light or no fault or sin at all.
- 5. Right Conscience:** when a person takes good and prudent decisions, accepting responsibilities to fulfill the same. A right conscience is a guide for us to take objective attitude about things around, and to take appropriate decisions according to our knowledge and discernment to fulfill this. Our earnest effort must be to form right conscience.

Importance of Forming Right Conscience

By nature, man is under the influence of sin despite his desire to live well. This is confirmed by St. Paul. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom 7:19). Good and prudent decisions taken under the promptings of a right conscience will be a guiding light for us to do good actions.

Human conscience is inborn to man but a right conscience is something which is cultivated. This is an on-going process and it is to be practiced continuously. Several factors are to be taken into consideration in the process of conscience formation, such as circumstances of one's life, social conditions, education, religious out-look, rules and regulations, etc.

Emphasis on the freedom of conscience as light and obligation to follow it should not blur the fact that there is an equal obligation to form one's conscience. Conscience is not something which a person simply has and uses either as a list of right and wrong actions or as a special calculator to find the difference.

Serious decisions taken lightly, judgments made on the basis of insufficient information, failure to consult proper authorities in complex questions, etc can lead to an erroneous conscience. Repeated failure to listen to the call of conscience can cripple one's sensitivity to values and silence one's conscience. The appeal to conscience as a moral authority for one's actions presupposes a good conscience. It remains true but it is not enough to invoke conscience. Sincerity alone is not sufficient. One must try for a conscience which is continually self-critical, aware of dangers of ignorance, prejudice, selfishness, arrogance, and self-sufficiency.

Important Factors in the Process of the Formation of Right Conscience

There are certain important factors which call our special attention in the process of the formation of right conscience:

1. Acquisition of Knowledge about Good and Evil

Conscience must be informed for an enlightened moral judgment. A well inspired conscience will be upright and truthful. The education of the conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subject to negative influences as they are tempted by sin to prefer their own judgments and to reject authoritative teachings. An erroneous judgment will depart from reason and divine law. Time-tested human values give us a clean understanding of good and evil. A proper knowledge about values and due practice of the same is also necessary. These values are determined by faith and morals of our religion but particularly our Christian values are based on love of God and love of neighbour. One must be aware of the dangers of ignorance that stands on the way of the good conscience. Serious decisions taken or judgments made on the basis of insufficient knowledge can lead to an erroneous conscience. Education for mature conscience is necessary to discern what is right and what is evil.

It is the value perception that enables us to decide as to what should be done and what to be shun in a given situation. Lack of knowledge of what is good and evil will affect our decision making. In that situation we may not be able to take prudent and reasonable decision.

2. Ability to take Appropriate and Prudent Decision

It is not sufficient to acquire knowledge about good and evil but one must be able to take right firm decision of doubts on important issues. One must be diligent enough to take proper, prudent decision according to the dictations of conscience. Clearing clouds of doubts can be cleared by seeking guidance from the superiors and competent persons and by reflecting on the word of God, by prayer etc.

3. Ensure Individual Dignity and Freedom

Individual freedom is an important requirement for the formation of right conscience. Any decision taken under dictates of conscience must be with due freedom and his freedom should not be curtailed by law, authority or pressure of emotions, influence of any other forces. Man has a right to act in conscience and in freedom so as to enable him personally to make moral decisions. He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience. It is important for every person to be sufficiently present himself to follow the voice of his conscience. Emphasis on the freedom of conscience and his obligation should not blur the fact that there is an equal obligation to form one's conscience. Responsible choice requires that we seek relevant information with sufficient individual freedom.

4. Seeking Counsel from the Holy Spirit

A Christian must earnestly seek help from the Spirit of God for a clear conscience. Under the divine inspiration we will be able to take prudent decision and to keep upright conscience. The Holy Spirit will guide and inspire us to take decision without fear or favour which is a guaranty of peace of mind. It is very important to invoke help from the Holy Spirit and gifts of the same Spirit, especially the virtue of prudence.

Helpful Factors in the Formation of Christian Conscience

Christian conscience must address itself on certain ground realities. One must be concerned not to defy God in his understanding of Godly standards and values. One must be careful not to encourage others to defy God in their understanding and actions. A Christian must assume his responsibility and must grow in appreciation of God's enormous investment in the salvation of people. For one who believes in Christ, the faith in Christ itself is the foundation of his conscience. He shall lead a life according to his faith. Consciousness is present in every normal person who has some moral sense or awareness but it needs to be formed and developed throughout life. Responsible choice requires that we seek out balanced help and information from competent persons. The guidelines that may help us in the formation of true Christian conscience are:

1. The Word of God

In the formation of our conscience the Word of God is the light for our path. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). By assimilating it in prayer and by a life of faith it can be put into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord frequently and daily. We are assisted by the gift of Holy Spirit, aided by true life witness and advice of others. The Divine word is an ever-living and healing power granted to our welfare by the merciful Father. Thus it has great importance in the formation of right conscience. The official teachings of the Church, issued time by time, after deep study, research, reflection and prayer, etc. are invaluable guide limes for the formation of conscience.

2. Inspiration from the Holy Spirit

A true Christian must seriously seek always what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in the divine law. He must be guided by the Holy Spirit and be helped by prayer to the same Spirit. He must pray for the virtues of prudence, humility and openness in the formation of true conscience. Any appropriate, right decision will have the special protection of Holy Spirit. Every Christian is given the grace to receive Holy Spirit at the Mystery of Initiation. One must carefully seek the help of the Holy Spirit through prayer and reflection. When we act according to the promptings of the conscience we can say that we follow the will of God. If our desire to do well is ignored or is prevented it can be said that we are keeping a partially dead conscience. The

commandments of God, the teachings of our Lord based on the gospels, the instruction of the Apostles and the inspirations given by the church are guidance and inspiration of the formation for the Christian conscience.

3. The teachings of the Church

The church, the mystical Body of Christ, is the right authority to explain and interpret the commandments of God for us. She is ever prepared and willing to teach and guide the people of God. The Church has strongly expressed her views on different social problems, like abortion, mercy-killing, war, discrimination based on caste, creed or race, misuse of drugs, cloning and other social evils. The church has been always keen in giving clear cut instructions and guidelines to show us the right path, how to behave and lead a conscientious life when confronted with burning social problems. The teachings of the Church are outlined and highlighted on the commandments of God, in the Counciliar and post-councilor (Vat.II) documents. A numbed conscience will lose its ability to respond or prevent sin. So, it is absolutely necessary to train ourselves to respond to the promptings of our conscience.

Our ultimate goal of life is to reach God who is the source of all goodness. Our conscience helps us to realize this ultimate purpose. In the backdrop of a different and sophisticated life situation where good is prevented or evil is depicted as something desirable, it is all the more important to hold our conscience clear and upright on Christian teachings. The dignity of the human person requires uprightness of moral conscience. Man must obey the certain judgments for his conscience. If he deliberately acts against it, he would condemn him.

The guidelines given by the law are important factors in our deliberations. The Christian, who is responsive to his or her conscience, must recognize the conscience as the voice of right and wrong or good and bad. He should be continually in the process to changing his or her values so as to match God's values and standards. The Christian conscience should function as his response to the Christian concepts of right and wrong. Since the Christian knowingly and deliberately puts the definitions of right and wrong in the hands of God, he recognizes his conscience as God's voice in his life. For a Christian to affirm his conscience by behaving in a manner consistent with his conscience is to affirm responsible relationship with God. To rebel against the conscience is to rebel against God Himself. Thus a Christian can offend his conscience and sin if his behaviour violates his understanding of God's will. It is also worth-remembering that conscience is not infallible and even good individuals can be guilty of self-deception. Humility and openness are necessary virtues in the formation and development of the conscience.

I. Let us Discuss

1. Conscience is inborn and a true conscience is born out of constant formation.
2. Having done something wrong, a person may defend himself saying he has acted according to his conscience. Can you justify his or her action?

II. Let us find out the Answers

1. What do you mean by conscience?
2. Why do you say that you have acted according to the will of God when you have done something with the promptings of your conscience?
3. True and healthy formation of conscience is possible only by your constant efforts. Why?
4. What is your understanding of true conscience?
5. What are the primary guidelines to be followed in the formation of Christian conscience? Please explain briefly on the same.

III. Activity

1. Collect some inspiring and wise sayings of great personalities. Present the same in your class for further discussions and enlightenment.

IV. Let us Read and Reflect

Romans 7: 13-25.