

Conscience and Authority

By Rev. Cormac Burke

Catholic Truth Society No.do0445 (1974).

The authority of the truth.

The relationship between conscience and authority is one of the most important and delicate of current questions. It cannot be separated from the relationship between conscience and truth.⁽¹⁾

The man who acknowledges that, though his mind is the only means by which he can come to the truth, the truth is greater than his mind, acknowledges the authority of the truth. The truth, so understood, clearly possesses absolute authority. It demands total submission on the part of the mind. The mind may find the truth hard to accept, it may wrestle with it, be tempted to resist it. But if it sees it as the truth, then it has no alternative if it is to remain sincere but to surrender to it, to accept it.

In this sense the truth teaches by its own authority, and the sincere mind cannot escape its sway. As Vatican II says, 'The only way truth can impose itself is by the force of its own gentle but powerful influence on the mind of man.' (Declaration on Religious Liberty, par. 1. C.T.S. Do 364.)

'Two plus two equals four' is an authoritative truth. It demands acceptance from my mind. A moment's reflection tells me that a truth such as this 'two plus two equals four' is not a product of my mind. Even if I didn't exist, it would still be true. It really is antecedent to my mind; it is above my mind. The mind is capable of rising to it, of seeing it. Once it does see it, once it becomes convinced of its truth, it accepts it. In fact, as we have said, it cannot refuse to accept the truth once it has seen it not, at least, without losing its own sincerity and lying to itself.

One can say that the truth commands allegiance, has authority, that it has power over man's mind, that it rules from above... Or one can express this in a different way. One can say that man's mind is capable of rising to the truth, grasping it, making it its own... This is perhaps the more important, just as it is the more appealing, way of putting it. We will return to this point later.

Trusting only oneself?

The surrender of the mind to the truth is not in any case a defeat. It is a victory. The mind that has been seeking the truth, and now at last discovers it, accepts it with an experience of relief and joy. One could illustrate this with the experience of the examinee who has been struggling with a mathematics problem, and suddenly sees the solution. He had been stuck, paralysed. Now he sees the truth, he can go forward. How many people, who have been struggling with the problem of life, have had similar experiences! They saw no explanations, no answers, or the answers they saw did not satisfy. They did not feel at peace with this or that solution; it did not fit all the points, it did not ring quite true. Now they have seen an answer that really seems to cover everything, that really seems true. They joyfully accept it.

There is a current impression at the root of many disgruntled attitudes that the mature man trusts only what he can verify for himself, and that to let oneself be guided by the word or authority of others is the mark of mental immaturity and betrays an insecure personality.

This of course is not necessarily true. If there is a clear sign of mental or emotional immaturity, it is precisely in the inability to distinguish between an authority or influence that can be trusted and one that cannot. The man who doesn't know who or what he can trust in life is an isolated and unhappy person. This seems to be the sad lot of many people today.

Trust and maturity.

The mature personality accepts the advice or indications of others, insofar as he has reason to trust them. And if he has enough reason for trusting them, he follows their advice even in matters which are beyond his own powers of checking personally. In fact, it is precisely when he is not in a position to check for himself some matter he regards as important, that he will feel happiest to have and be able to follow the indications of some authority he can really trust. A man is glad to have a doctor or lawyer to consult, and readily follows their advice, in areas where he himself may be ignorant, because he trusts their professional competence and integrity.

The motorist who wants to get to Birmingham and consults a map, or asks an A.A. man, or follows a signpost, is trusting authority and is very glad to be able to do so. He regards it as no humiliation unless he is a fool to have to rely on maps and signs and guides to get to his destination. Indeed, if he has been a bit uncertain about his way or feeling somewhat lost, it is with a sense of relief even of gratitude that he reads the signpost he comes across or listens to the A.A. man who offers to advise him.

Most people will in fact trust the map or signpost more than their own unaided sense of direction. It is logical. The map or signpost, they feel, is based on greater knowledge than they possess. It is only reasonable to trust it more.

In accepting the truth (the authority) of the signpost, the traveller has no sense of something being imposed on him from the outside. His position is rather that of someone who has been offered a piece of information he didn't possess before, who has freely sized it up, freely accepted it, and freely acts upon it.

One feels that the difficulties of many Catholics regarding the authoritative guidance of the Church would disappear if only they could see their position in this light. The authority of the Church, in her teaching on faith and morals, is a service. It is a signposting of the way to heaven. It is trustworthy, for it is divinely guaranteed.⁽¹⁾ It is not forced on anyone. It is simply offered to men. And each one can, if he wishes, make it his own.

Making the truth one's own.

He makes it his own. This is the idea that needs to be emphasized. The Catholic undoubtedly puts his trust in the guidance of the Church (as does the traveller in the signposting of the local authority). But it is not really correct to say that he surrenders his mind to that guidance. What happens is rather the opposite. In accepting that guidance or teaching, he incorporates it, as a further point of knowledge, into his own grasp of the truth. It becomes part of the breadth and scope of his mind, an enlargement of his patrimony of truth, of the knowledge he possesses.

This is clear in purely human matters. Once you have grasped, for instance, the theorem of Pythagoras or the notion of Evolution, it becomes yours, part of your mind, a possession no one can take from you... You can only lose it by getting it wrong, by falling into error about it...

Yet you haven't invented this truth. This may be humbling to your pride (how the refusal to be so humbled has so often held up the progress of truth and science!). But though you haven't invented it, you have now found it. You haven't discovered it and yet you have. You have not the merit of the original discoverer (and yet he too did no more than discover it; he did not create it). But you have the enrichment of discovery.

One does not really surrender one's mind to the truth. If there is any question of surrender, it is the truth that surrenders that lets itself be caught by the human mind. Truth, after all, is the quarry of science. And all truly scientific research is based on the supposition, and sustained by the hope, that the truth can be caught.

And so with the revelation of Christ. The Catholic faith is not an obligation so much as a privilege: a new opportunity. It offers one the freedom to take up a system of thought that is divinely guaranteed, and to make it one's own.

Faith is a free thing.

No one would say that a local authority in putting up a signpost at a crossroads is in any way imposing on people or limiting their personal freedom. It is rather facilitating their choice in a way they appreciate. How absurd then is the suggestion and, though absurd, it is often made that in the Catholic Church there is no real freedom because Catholics are forced to submit to a set body of teaching. The Catholic Church indeed claims to teach the truth about the way to heaven. But no one is forced to believe in the teaching of the Church, or indeed forced to do anything in the Catholic Church. The Church is not a police state or a concentration camp or a prison. It is a voluntary system. Faith is a free thing. The Church cannot make me believe. I believe because I want to. Because I choose to.(3)

Each one of us is free to believe what he wants, or, more accurately, to believe what his mind approves as credible. I have always felt that freedom and have freely wanted to believe the Catholic Church's teaching because I have considered the evidence and have come to the conclusion that its teaching is guaranteed by our Lord and is true. Presumably all Catholics have done the same. I cannot imagine any other rational way of being a Catholic.

Authority serves freedom.

The authority of revelation of Jesus Christ who, as he promised, is present with us still in the teaching of his Church is something to be approached not with reluctance and constraint, but gladly and with gratitude. It is hard to understand why a person should complain at having a divine way opened and signposted before him. We would say it was a very old fashioned and unintelligent motorist who objected to the opening of the M1. He is not forced to take the motorway. He can go to Birmingham by another route if he thinks it is better, or he can go somewhere else if he is not interested in getting to Birmingham. But the average man who does want to get to Birmingham is glad to have the motorway, and freely follows it. Yet all the time he travels he is trusting authority: that the signs are true and that the road really does lead to Birmingham.

Seen in this light, the authority of the Church, far from restricting man's freedom, facilitates the choice of personal conscience. It signposts the way, and so gives an assurance (that those who

understand life as the problem of getting to heaven, badly want) that one's choices place one on the right road.

Freedom of conscience is a precious thing however often improperly understood. But freedom of conscience is not best exercised at unmarked crossroads. At an unmarked crossroads, the man who wishes to get somewhere, the man who thinks his choices really matter, wants a compass, a map, a guide. He wants information. He needs to inform his conscience. And that, in matters of salvation, is the marvellous function of the Church. The Church's authoritative teaching does not force conscience; it informs it. It provides conscience with vital information. It removes doubts. It gives certainty. In doing so it does not take away our personal freedom. It simply makes it easier for us to exercise it, if we wish, in choosing roads that are divinely guaranteed to lead to Heaven.

Freedom of Conscience within the Church.

The Church - the home of freedom?

To the Christians of the first centuries, the Church, which was to them undeniably a source of authority, was also the home of freedom. And the pagan world was attracted to Christianity by the atmosphere of freedom, which reigned within it, and by the promise of freedom it offered.

How is it that today, in a world no less eager to be free, the last place most pagans would look to, as 'the home of freedom', is the Catholic Church? And how is it sadder still! that so many Catholics seem to find more constraint than freedom in their life in the Church?

To the pagan world of today, the Catholic Church despite recent changes and reforms remains an institution based on authority, and since authority and personal freedom are considered to be in irreconcilable opposition, current tensions in the Church are regarded as logical in a system where individual conscience and personal freedom are being constantly required to submit to authority.

Far from being able to answer or satisfy the suspicions or criticisms of non-Catholics, we ourselves are often those most swayed by them. Let us consider some of the most basic criticisms in more detail.

Objections.

In the Catholic Church, it is said, one is forced to submit to a set body of teaching which is a direct limitation of freedom of choice. In consequence, so the criticism continues, some Catholics find themselves in the intolerable position of being told one thing by their conscience and yet having to submit to the contrary because it is insisted upon by Church authority; and this is a much more serious violation of conscience...

Now the first of these criticisms is nonsense. The second is partly nonsense, and partly based on a misapprehension.

The Church is a free system.

As to the first, one has to repeat the point (obvious though it should be) made above, that no one is forced to do anything in the Catholic Church. The Church is not a concentration camp. It is not a police state. It is a free system. No one is obliged to be a Catholic or to believe what the Church teaches. No one can force me to be a Catholic, any more than they can force me to belong to the Conservative or Labour Parties. I am a Tory or a Socialist or a Liberal or a Catholic or a Protestant or a Moslem because I choose, because I personally have been convinced by the particular

principles in question. And if I am no longer convinced of their truth or validity, I drop them. I choose to be a Catholic, or I choose not to be a Catholic. No one forces me. Nothing could be freer.

Conscience in conflict with authority.

But how about the situation of the Catholic whose conscience tells him one thing, while the Church's authority calls on him to accept something different? Is he not thereby being asked to steam-roll his conscience, to surrender his personality and freedom, and to live in a position of basic insincerity with himself? And is this not happening all the time in the Catholic Church? Are Catholics especially as they grow in maturity and awareness not being faced more and more with such conflicts of conscience?

No one will deny that conflicts between conscience and authority occur in the Church. Yet I would suggest that real conflicts occur much less than might be imagined, that the sense of conflict which many Catholics seem to have today really derives not from greater awareness but precisely from a lack of true self-awareness, from a superficial understanding of what it means to be a Catholic, from a failure to grasp the freedom and self-determination of their own Catholic position.

Let us consider the case where a real conflict between authority and conscience occurs; in other words, the case where authority (eg. the teaching of Pope or Council) is ranged on one side, saying that a particular way of acting is seriously wrong and to be avoided, while the individual's conscience the 'whole' of his conscience, ie. the whole of his personal principles and convictions stands solidly in opposition, saying that the same way of acting is right and to be followed. In such a case, of course, he would follow his conscience. He should follow his conscience, in fact, according to the traditional principles of Catholic morality.(4)

Rejecting the Church.

Naturally, the matter would not stop there. In solving this conflict of conscience so he would have fundamentally altered his position as a Catholic; he would have largely emptied it of its basic meaning, and almost certainly rendered it sooner or later untenable. The point (whether he sees it or not) is that, in resolving his problem of conscience in this way, he is rejecting the Church. He is rejecting the Church in effect, in its essence, even if he says he has no intention of leaving it. He is rejecting the meaning of the Church even if he claims he is not rejecting membership within it. The conclusion he has come to which is really that in an important matter of its teaching the Church has not after all been upheld by Christ is precisely to reject the Catholic concept of the Church and its Magisterium. The Catholic concept of the Magisterium a teaching body guaranteed by God (cf. Lk 10: 16) has collapsed in his mind.(5)

The man, whose conscience can no longer tolerate a Catholic concept of the Church, may still in fact continue to live the practices of a Catholic; he may still frequent the Sacraments, for instance. But the heart will have gone out of his religion. His religious life can no longer have the dimension of joy it gives to know that one cannot be deceived about the Christian way of life on earth, about the road to Heaven... In actual practice, the whole of his encounter with Christ will become uncertain, for if Christ is not present in the living voice and teaching of the Church, there is no guarantee of his presence in the Sacraments, in the Eucharist, in the Mass...

If a man concludes that Christ does not uphold the Church's teaching on birth-control, then he has no reason to put faith in her teaching about divorce or euthanasia or abortion or pre-marital sex. All these become open questions, as far as he is concerned, crossroads of choice without any signposts,

where one man's preference is no more likely to be right than another's. There is no such thing any longer as a true Christian criterion in his mind. There is just human opinion, no more. He has not only lost grip on the rock of Christian truth, he has lost sight of it.

What it means to be a Catholic.

Many today would argue that one is entitled, on grounds of conscience and in some fundamental matter, to choose a viewpoint contrary to that taught by the Church. Perhaps; but what one is not entitled to do, after such a choice, is to insist on regarding one's new position as a Catholic position. Such insistence is not to demand freedom; or if it is, it is to demand the freedom to empty terms and positions of any real meaning.

To claim the right both to be called Catholic and to be totally subjective about what being a Catholic means, is a peculiarly modern phenomenon one that may not be due to insincerity, but that must then be put down to a lack of thought, to a failure to understand that to be a Catholic means to belong voluntarily to a Body that, where fundamental principles are concerned, thinks and teaches with the mind of Christ.

Self-induced conflicts.

Now I know that there are Catholics who feel that in certain cases their conscience tells them one thing, and the Church tells them another. In their dilemma, they follow the Church but reluctantly, with a sense of coercion...

My comment is that this sensation of conflict between conscience and authority is self-induced. It derives, as I have said earlier, not from a real collision, but from superficial thinking, from a lack of self-awareness, of grasp of one's own values.

Such Catholics need only to reflect a little on their sense of coercion to realise that whatever force they are aware of does not come from outside... The force comes from within. They are not being forced by the authority of the Church; they are being forced by their own belief in the authority of the Church. The teaching of the Church, after all, gains its force only from personal conviction. It holds sway only over the mind that is convinced of its truth. They are being forced, therefore, by their own free conviction, or whatever remains of their own free conviction, that the Church's teaching is divinely guaranteed. They are in effect being forced by their own conscience!

This apparently paradoxical conclusion becomes all the more evident if one remembers that conscience is a deep-rooted faculty of moral judgment which judges in accordance with its own terms of reference, with the principles it holds and with the evidence it sees in each case. What happens to the Catholic, in the cases we are considering, is that his conscience may see evidence in one direction, on the one hand, and his same conscience sees evidence in an opposed direction, on the other.

Let us suppose that the issue in question is that of artificial birth-control. On the one hand, he sees considerations which seem to argue that contraception is necessary and therefore permissible (demographic or psychological arguments, etc.) and his mind is swayed by these considerations. On the other hand, he sees considerations which argue that contraception is wrong (the traditional teaching of the Church, repeated in *Humanae Vitae* see *The Regulation of Birth*, C.T.S. Do 411),(6) and his mind is also swayed by these considerations, but in the contrary direction. He must judge which evidence sways with him most. If he judges in favour of the Church's teaching, it is because his conscience still freely accepts that the Church is upheld by Christ.

It is not true, in his case, to say that his conscience is in opposition to authority. Belief in the trustworthiness of the Church's authority is part of his conscience because he has freely chosen to make it part. The whole point is that the Church's authority influences him only insofar as he FREELY accepts it.(7)

What we are discussing therefore is not so much a conflict of conscience, as a conflict within conscience... It is a conflict not between personal conscience and an external enforced principle, but between principles which personal conscience freely holds but finds hard to reconcile. If there is a conflict of conscience, it is precisely because conscience is divided against itself. It is not conscience against the Church, but conscience against conscience. The consequence is clear: if a man wishes to protest about an interior conflict brought about by principles which he has personally and freely accepted, he should really protest to no one but himself.

Freedom and trustworthy authority.

The two terms freedom and authority therefore are not necessarily in irreconcilable opposition. If authority is understood as arbitrary will, then it does clearly stand in opposition to individual freedom. But if it is understood as it ought to be in relation to the Magisterium of the Church as a competent source of reliable information, as an authoritative and therefore trustworthy guide to man's true life-goal, then it is seen to be not the opponent to personal freedom, but the key to its fruitful exercise.

Freedom is found close to Christ.

The first Christians were men and women who, after groping for long in the dark, had suddenly been offered an extraordinary goal to their life, and had seen opened and signposted before them the road to that goal. At last they had the freedom, not to wander aimlessly, but to go Somewhere! It is true that they would never have acquired this sense of freedom, the freedom to travel if they had not originally been looking for some worthwhile goal to life. But the strikingly joyous character of their freedom was above all due to the absolute confidence they felt they could put in the indications of him who had signposted the road they were following. He could not deceive them.

The man to whom freedom means following the impulses or instincts of each moment might do well to ask himself if this is not the freedom to wander in the dark or, at least, to go round in ever narrowing circles. To such a man, in any event, it is obvious that any voice from outside which claims to speak objective truth, and to set a goal to life that is valid and binding for all men, will appear as an enemy of his freedom.

To those however for whom life is a road upwards towards a definite destination, and for whom in consequence freedom means finding that road and being able to follow it, the mere possibility that at a certain point along the line of human history someone arrived from that destination, so as to signpost the road for us, appears as electrifying. If, on checking this man's life and credentials, they become convinced that his indications are trustworthy, that what he has said is true because he is the truth itself, because he is God! then his indications appear not as restraints placed on man, not as burdens or obligations, but as immense rays of light lighting up the way before each man, enabling him to see his way forward, so that he can travel it energetically, securely and freely.

Close to Christ, one finds freedom. Listening to his voice, at last one sees one's way clearly. His authority does not oppress, because it merits confidence, because it is seen to be trustworthy. His authority teaches, as a signpost teaches, and a man is glad to follow it, and follows it freely.

Those who do not believe in the truth, or do not believe in Christ or those who, even if they regard themselves as Christians, cannot find Christ in the Church will regard any exercise of teaching authority in the Church as a threat to freedom. Those who see reasons to trust the Church's authority because they see in it the voice of Christ ('Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me' (Lk 10:16)) and believe that the voice of Christ does not deceive but speaks the truth will regard the teaching authority of the Church as an ally of their freedom. 'You will learn the truth and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8: 32).

Footnotes.

1. Cf. Crisis Conscience and Truth, C.T.S. Do 446.
2. Those who do not believe in the divine guarantee are not of course likely to regard it as trustworthy. But this is the whole crux of the matter.
3. Two important points should be noted here: (A) The more theologically minded reader will remind me quite rightly that faith is not just one's own choice... Faith is first of all a grace; a free gift from God: 'No one can come to me unless my Father draws him' (Jn 6:44). The text above naturally presupposes this grace. Then, of course, it is I who choose to correspond or not. It is I who freely accept, or freely reject, this grace of faith. This is closely connected with a second point: (B) Modern man does well to prize his personal freedom. But he should not forget (or be allowed to forget) that freedom always carries with it certain consequences; that therefore one cannot reasonably act freely and at the same time ignore or think one can escape what are in fact inescapable consequences of one's own free actions. I am free to step out of a fifth floor window, but, if I do, I am not free to escape the consequence of having my brains bashed out on the pavement. The author of these articles would like to see Catholics in general more conscious of both the freedom and the reasonableness of the faith in the Church that being a Catholic implies. But insofar as there are some Catholics who choose to exercise the freedom (which, God help us, all of us possess) not to place their faith in the Church's teaching (or not to obey her discipline), then he would also wish to draw their attention to the inescapable consequences of such a free refusal to believe or obey. And let us not be afraid of the word obedience. Faith means to put one's trust in the word of Christ and therefore to be prepared to obey him. Faith implies obedience. (Scripture speaks of the obedience of faith (cf. Acts 6:7; Heb 11:8); our Lord makes obedience the test and proof of love for him: 'Whoever receives my commandments and obeys them, he it is who loves me' (Jn 14: 21).) The Catholic whose faith makes him see Christ in the authority of the Church ('Anyone who listens to you listens to me' (Lk 10:16)), and therefore obeys that authority, is conscious of obeying Christ. And of course he is conscious of obeying freely; there lies the dignity and the merit of his obedience it is freely given. The person who refuses to obey, who rejects the authority of the Church, also rejects it freely. He must weigh the responsibility of his free act of rejection. And he must certainly accept the main and inevitable consequence of this free act emphasized by our Lord himself: 'Anyone who rejects you rejects me; and anyone who rejects me, rejects him that sent me' (Lk *ibid.*). In short, if one is free to reject the authority of the Church, one is not free to regard oneself as a Catholic or a faithful follower of Christ, after such a rejection.
4. One should follow an erroneous conscience unless one is aware of, or suspects, the error. The error here lies in failing to see Christ present in the teaching of the Church. As to the

consequences of this error, cf. not only what follows in the text above but also paragraph (B) of footnote 3.

5. In speaking of the authority or the teaching authority (the 'Magisterium') of the Church, it should be clear that I refer to the teaching in matters of belief or conduct which the Pope or an Ecumenical Council, in the name of the mission they have received from Christ, present as true or binding to all the faithful. I do not of course refer to the teaching of any Church pastor, or group of pastors however authoritatively put forward which merely expresses personal or private viewpoints.
 6. Many people who are swayed by the apparent force of the human arguments in favour of contraception (eg. the population explosion) also feel the counterforce of the human arguments against (eg. the argument that if contraceptive sex is licit in marriage, one can show no clear or compelling reason why it may not be licit outside marriage; or the argument that a contraceptive sexual act is clearly a limited act of self-donation and surrender, so much so that one can no longer find in it the elements that could make it an adequate and unique expression of the unlimited and exclusive surrender proper to marriage). In the main text above, however, we are taking the extreme case of the person who has not considered or has not seen the logical objections to contraception, and is therefore left solely with what appears as a theological objection (if the Church has been wrong for so many years in her ordinary teaching about birth-control, then Christ has failed in his promises to his Church).
 7. In speaking of authority, one may be speaking of political force which restrains the physical freedom of the individual. One should not confuse this form of coercive authority which is particularly repugnant to the modern mind with moral authority which sways the mind according to the persuasiveness of its principles. This is a truly free and democratic authority. Such is the authority of the Church.
-