Conscience and Truth

By Rev. Cormac Burke.
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Introduction.

Authority and truth are in crisis today. And so, therefore, is conscience.

Authority is in crisis. The modern man's attitude towards authority is highly critical. The very idea of authority seems offensive to his sense of freedom and personality. His instinctive reaction to authority is to reject it.

Truth is in crisis. Modern man is sceptical as to the existence of any real or objective truth about man, about his destiny, about the worth of his actions.

There is perhaps one truth modern man still believes in: the truth of science. This is the one God he still believes in and follows though recently he has begun to lose his conviction that he is following a benevolent God who will lead him to his own fulfilment and happiness. He is in fact beginning to be afraid of this God of science and technology. His God still leads on self-confidently. And man still follows but at a distance, more and more reluctantly, with a growing sense of being alone and lost, of not being able to know himself or help himself. For this is the tense paradox of modern man. As never before he has discovered and mastered the truth about things. The truth about himself has never seemed to elude him more.

Yet man remains the one being in the universe that makes conscious choices. He cannot escape the burden of choice. Nor without deceiving himself can he escape the sense that his choices matter, at least for his own life. Therefore, inevitably, he looks for some standard by which to measure the worth and direction of his choices. Having rejected the standard of external authority and that of objective truth, the only standard that remains to him is his own conscience. But if he takes the idea of conscience seriously, if he examines his own conscience seriously, he will find that his conscience too is in crisis.

If there is no external authority that can be trusted, if there is no objective truth in things (or if conscience cannot grasp it), then conscience itself is in a critical state. For there is nothing to show that conscience can be taken seriously. There is no proof that conscience itself can be trusted.

Can I trust my conscience? The man who takes his life seriously must be in crisis unless he can find a positive answer to this question.

Can I trust my conscience? It is true that some people today answer the question with a confident and unqualified Yes to the point that they appear to endow personal conscience, in its role as a guide, with the very quality they indignantly deny to the guidance of Church or Pope: the quality of infallibility. 'Supremacy of conscience' is a principle they frequently invoke, using it precisely as if it meant infallibility of conscience, whereas it does not and clearly cannot mean any such thing. Trust in conscience is simply a dogma for them, a blind and irrational dogma, for they can give

absolutely no reasons to support it. It is only by being superficial that they can seem content with their unthinking trust in conscience. If they were to question their own position, to probe a little below the surface, if they were in fact to question their own conscience, sincerely and in depth, they would plunge themselves into crisis.

Can I trust my conscience? The man, the 'modern' man, who trusts no external authority, who believes in an objective truth, and yet who wishes to take himself seriously, who is prepared to take the voice of conscience seriously, has no grounds to give any other answer to this question than No. There lies his crisis.

Can I trust my conscience? The Christian answer is Yes and No. I must follow my conscience, and if I follow it sincerely - testingly - I can be confident that it will lead me to a growing knowledge of the truth. But the Christian concept of conscience is at the same time impregnated with the idea that conscience is a fallible guide. It may go wrong. It may take the wrong road, and take me with it. Therefore I need constantly to test the principles operating in my conscience, lest false principles pride or prejudice, for instance begin to dominate it and to lead me astray.

If man is in crisis until he can find an answer to the question 'Can I trust my conscience'?, the Christian answer 'Yes; and No' clearly solves the crisis only in part. This is as it ought to be. A man should always follow his conscience (when it speaks clearly), but he should never be satisfied with it. It can too easily be misinformed.' As we have said, conscience may be supreme, but it is not infallible. It can in fact never give good service to anyone who is not aware that it is indeed a guide to be followed, but a fallible guide. Only if a man learns to appreciate both the greatness and the delicacy of conscience, only if he learns to obey it and to question it, to listen to it and to form it, will conscience serve him well.

Formation of Conscience. The fear of being influenced.

The fear of being influenced is one of the most characteristic fears of our age. It is healthy for a man to be on his guard against undue influence or bad influence. But the fear of influence of any type is clearly unhealthy. Today it has practically reached the level of being a neurosis. It is unhealthy among other reasons because in practice it is quite impossible for a man to avoid being influenced. All he can do is to try to distinguish between positive and helpful influences, and negative or harmful influences; and to welcome the former and resist the latter.

We are being influenced whether we like it or not or are aware of it or not. We are being influenced by fashion, by views expressed in newspapers or on television, by the comments and even the attitudes of our friends, etc. We are being influenced in our thinking, in our standards, and therefore also in our consciences. For if conscience can be defined as a faculty of moral judgment that distinguishes between right and wrong, it evidently must judge according to some standard or standards. There is a basic innate standard to conscience, what we might call a certain instinct of rightness and wrongness (the scholastic 'synderesis'). But in the main these standards are developed precisely under the influences that surround us and affect us from earliest days: home, school, environment, friends, reading, etc.

No one goes through life with unchanged moral standards. Some of the standards one originally held are matured and confirmed and intensified. Others perhaps give way to completely new ones. And so our conscience the elements of judgment which make up our criterion of right and wrong is constantly being formed and reformed.

All education, just as all advertising or all political propaganda, is designed to influence. The aim of education is to inculcate a grasp of facts or principles that will make a person better prepared for life. Moral education, concretely, is designed to inculcate principles of conduct. In this sense moral education is the aim of parents, teachers, youth leaders, civil rights campaigners, etc. All education which seeks to inculcate some moral or civic code is aimed therefore at forming conscience, at increasing our sensitivity to right or wrong. However, the influences operating on the development of conscience are not necessarily always formative. They can be deformative as, for instance, in the case of the parent or teacher who implants racial prejudice, or a sense of social snobbery or of class warfare.

So there is a right way and a wrong way of forming the individual conscience. There are right norms to be inculcated; or wrong ones. People of course differ as to which exactly are the right norms, and which are the wrong; what exactly makes for a right, an enlightened, conscience in one man; and what makes for a wrong or erroneous conscience in another.

The traditional Catholic idea is that a conscience is right when it tends to judge in accordance with objective truth. It is wrong when the principles by which it judges are, objectively speaking, false. (2)

Formation of conscience, therefore, is that process by which true principles of conduct gradually become operative in a person's mind, by which his mind gradually takes hold of true principles. Deformation of conscience is the process by which false principles gradually come to shape and govern the working of the mind.

When conscience protests.

The grasp of right principles is the first condition of the sound formation of conscience. But an equally important condition is to live according to these principles. In other words, conscience also tends to be formed by living according to conscience; and conscience tends to be deformed by living contrary to conscience. To hold certain principles in one's conscience, and then to act against them, is of the essence of moral evil or sin. Every man who knows himself has had the experience of sinning, of choosing something which his conscience tells him to be wrong. In such cases, when the will chooses against conscience, it may not be content with a breakaway movement. It may attempt a takeover. It may try to manipulate conscience, to bend conscience to principles that suit its choice.

Let us examine this further. Conscience judges that something is morally good, and ought to be done. For instance, a man feels he must tell the truth, even though, in his circumstances, he finds this very difficult. But the will is free. In his will, he may decide otherwise. He may choose to lie. To lie, of course, in such a case appears to the will as something good (not as a moral good, but as a good in the sense that it offers some immediate relief, or satisfaction). Conscience may oppose this choice of the will, retaining a clear awareness that, at a deeper level, such a choice is not good. Or conscience may, after a debate, acquiesce for a moment, allowing that it seems good. But usually this acquiescence is short lived. Once the will is satisfied in its object, its demands subside, the mind can review the situation in greater freedom and objectivity, and then conscience speaks with its voice of judgment: 'That was wrong'. And so the will stands accused. A man cannot shake off the awareness, 'I did wrong'.

But if a man acquires the habit of sinning, if he lets his will habitually choose wrong in a particular area of conduct, then the temptation will be strong to want to find a way of silencing the accusing voice of conscience, and so letting the will out of dock...

This is the crisis point. The will may, so to speak, 'plot' against mind and conscience. It may try to make the mind dwell on 'reasons' that seem to justify the conduct in question. And it may succeed in its attempt.

For of course the will can choose an intellectual act as the object of its desire. Just as, for instance, it can choose to dwell on a truth taught by the Church and on all the supernatural and human motives in favour of accepting it as true so it can choose to dwell on some error, and on the arguments that seem to support that error.

Conscience will protest initially. It will put up a fight; all the more strongly because it is a fight where the ultimate issue may well be its own survival, its own independence and freedom.

But if the will wins, and if a man lets his will win time and again, then by dint of dwelling on the attractive points of error, he can cloud his own mind and deaden his conscience. If a man lets his conscience down in this fight, he ends up not with a free conscience but with one that is enslaved to his (bad) will; one that is ready to fall in with and approve anything the will wants. Such a man has lost his freedom of conscience.

Supremacy of conscience.

That great Englishman, Cardinal Newman, is frequently invoked today, and rightly so, as one of the main modern exponents of the 'supremacy of conscience'. His Letter to the Duke of Norfolk (1874) contains the famous phrase, 'If I am obliged to bring religion into after dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem quite the thing), I shall drink to the Pope, if you please still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards'.(3)

But, in defending the supremacy of conscience, he is very explicit as to what sort of conscience can be regarded as supreme, and as to what must be our attitude towards its supremacy: conscience understood 'not as a fancy or an opinion, but as a dutiful obedience to what claims to be a Divine voice speaking within us' (ibid.). Many of those who invoke Newman today, on this matter of the rights of conscience, fail to echo his emphasis on the duties of conscience, on the duties owed towards conscience. In his Apologia, he writes, 'I have always contended that obedience even to an erring conscience was the way to gain light' (Ch. IV). No doubt he felt he was speaking from personal experience. And anyone familiar with his life knows how he suffered from his immensely sensitive obedience to his conscience, how he suffered as it brought him to the light.

Today, more than ever, it is necessary to say that the man who really listens to his conscience and is prepared to be faithful to it, will often have the sense of obeying a voice that leads him in a direction a large part of him does not feel like following. We are of course speaking of the man who takes his conscience seriously, who looks up to it and respects it; and for this reason is prepared to acknowledge its supremacy and obey it.

Newman writes elsewhere that if we wish to find religious (or moral) truth, we must 'interrogate our hearts, and (since it is a personal individual matter) interrogate our own hearts, interrogate our own consciences, interrogate, I will say, the God who dwells there', and to do so 'with an earnest desire to know the truth and a sincere intention of following it' (cf. Ward,Life, II, 330).

Conscience is a precious but delicate guide. Its voice is easily distorted or obscured. To dictate to conscience is to silence and, eventually, to destroy it. Conscience must be listened to, and listened to sensitively. It needs to be interrogated, even to be cross-examined. And only those who habitually interrogate their conscience and are ready to pay heed even to its awkward answers, will not cheat their conscience or be cheated by it.(4)

Conscience: our security system.

All sin turns us away from God and closes us in on ourselves. The self-centredness of sin, therefore, is the enemy not only of our eternal salvation, but also of our human development and happiness here on earth. To be overcome by sin is to be wounded, to suffer damage, in one's integrity and personality. We are in constant danger from this enemy, but nature has equipped us with a basic defence system, which is our conscience our intimate sensitivity to good and evil.

The man who understands the importance and delicacy of conscience will be more concerned for its health than for the health of his body. A malformed or warped conscience is a diseased conscience. And a diseased conscience is the moral equivalent of a diseased nervous system. There are moments when we come into contact with physical pain when we all regret the sensitivity of our nerves. In such moments we may be tempted to regard our nervous system as a nuisance, and to wish we didn't have it, or that it didn't work. Yet, for normal living, the absence or failure of the nervous system could prove fatal. The man whose nerve endings do not function, who feels no pain and therefore withdraws from no pain, may not suffer as other men do. But he is in greater danger of doing himself real harm, of burning or wounding or freezing his hand or arm beyond any possibility of recovery.

Similarly, when a man's conscience has gone, one may say that his essential security system the built-in system of nature has broken down. Morally he is defenceless, against selfishness and the whole process of human frustration. Humanly, without any sensitivity to right or wrong, he is a sub-man.

A man's conscience is healthy when his moral principles are right and in accordance with objective truth. When a man's moral principles are unsound or wrong, his conscience is sick or diseased. When a man has no principles at all, his conscience is dead.

A healthy conscience is not an absolute safeguard against wrongdoing. A man with a healthy conscience may still sin, but he will be aware of it. His conscience will send out distress signals and he will notice them. It will keep calling for a change of course - for a change of heart or conduct - and can bring him back to normal.

Even if the will has become quite infected and undermined by attachment to sin, as long as the mind remains healthy the will may, with God's help, be won back. But if the mind itself goes, if sin or error actually reaches the mind and infects it, falsifying its truth, warping its principles, darkening its light... our Lord's words, 'If the light that is in you is darkness' (Mt 6:24), are a warning against this possibility. A man's conscience can be darkened. This can happen without his fault. Or he can, culpably, darken his own conscience. In either case his conscience is like a maladjusted computer; it will misinterpret and mishandle the information fed into it and consistently offer, as correct, the wrong answers.

Conscience is personal and singular.

Conscience is one’s own sense of the rightness or wrongness of things. Conscience, therefore, is personal. And it is singular. I can say, my conscience tells me this is right or that is wrong. I cannot really say what other people’s consciences tell them, and less still can I be guided by the consciences of others.

Is there such a thing as a ’collective’ conscience about moral matters? Perhaps; but it is a conscience that one can never properly examine. One can only adequately examine one’s own conscience. Of all the types of opinion polls, therefore, those about matters of conscience probably have least value. If it is difficult enough at times to know the sincerity of one’s own conscience, it is quite impossible to check the sincerity of a supposed collective conscience. In any case, even if opinion reports or polls truly reflected what other people sincerely feel in their consciences, they can provide no sure guide for me in my actions, since I will be judged not by whether I followed the consciences of others, but by whether I followed my own conscience, ie. by whether I listened to it sincerely, respected it and obeyed it.’ In Newman’s words, it is our own hearts, our own consciences, we must interrogate.

Moral responsibility cannot be collectivized. It remains personal and singular. To try to take refuge behind the presumed consciences of other people, pretending to oneself that in this way one’s own individual responsibility is diluted, is to fool oneself and to introduce a fatal element of insincerity into one’s own moral life.

Sincerity.

Sincerity: this too is undoubtedly a key factor in the formation of a sound conscience. But there is a strong tendency in all of us to deceive ourselves, and we would be wise not to take the sincerity of our conscience for granted. It can be achieved but only if we are ready to submit our hearts to that constant interrogating of which Newman speaks.

As already pointed out, a man’s conscience may be sincere and may yet be informed (malformed, deformed) by wrong principles. Nevertheless, the man who habitually questions himself (ie. the man who, in a sense, habitually tests his own sincerity) will sooner or later gain new light to correct his principles where they are mistaken. Newman again remains an outstanding example.

The greater importance our age attaches to conscience will always be beneficial provided we attach equal importance to examination of conscience. The traditional Christian practice of Examination of Conscience never mattered more than today. It is only logical to expect that it will be a more and more frequent theme of sermons, articles, discussion groups, etc.

To place oneself in the presence of an all seeing God is the best safeguard against insincerity, against even the most veiled temptation to self-deception in the depths of one’s heart or conscience. God, who knows our innermost thoughts and motives and who loves us, will not let us deceive ourselves provided always that we seek him and listen to him. He will ensure that the light of our conscience is light indeed, and not darkness, which we have mistaken for the light.

Conscience and Truth.

’What is the truth?’ (Jn 18:38). Pontius Pilate’s question to Jesus expresses the scepticism not only of a Roman but also of so many men of the twentieth century. ’What is the truth?’; by the very tone of voice with which he put the question, Pilate probably tried to make it clear that he didn’t really expect an answer. In his heart of hearts, perhaps he didn't really want an answer. The fact is that he

didn’t wait for one: ’He went out’ (Jn ibid.), and so deprived mankind of what would have been one of its rarest treasures: a definition of truth from the lips of Truth itself.

Reading the Gospel account of this Judgment scene, we sense that Pilate had begun to feel the attraction of Jesus’ personality. If he suddenly breaks off the conversation and takes, refuge in scepticism, it is because Jesus at the very moment when his life depended on gaining the Roman Governor’s favour had bluntly brought up this matter of the truth, in the most unpalatable and uncompromising terms: ’This is why I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. And everyone who is on the side of the truth listens to my voice’ (Jn 18: 37).

Our Lord’s words, before the man who is about to judge him, are very clear. When he speaks of the truth, he means (and we feel that Pilate understands him to mean) something objective, not something subjective, not mere opinion which men can debate, but truth that is valid for all. He makes the truth (the revealing of the truth) the purpose of his mission to men; just as he makes the truth (the acceptance of the truth) the test of allegiance to him.

His words are very clear so much so that all those who understand Christianity as the following of Jesus Christ must realise clearly that to follow Jesus means to accept and to follow an objective standard of truth.

Our Lord’s words are very clear. So also is the contrast between his position and Pilate’s. He was really inviting Pilate as he invites all men to accept his standard of the truth. But the invitation was too much for Pilate. In his scepticism, he had no time for such dogmatism; or perhaps, in his prejudices, he had no time to try to understand it. He was perfectly clear about one thing as are so many people today that there is no such thing as the truth, at least in matters of religious belief or moral conduct; no such thing as the truth about man’s nature or origin or destiny or the worth of his actions. No objective truth exists on these questions. All that exists is subjective opinion, individual choice and personal preference. And no one has the right to say that anyone else’s beliefs or actions are better or worse, truer or falser, than his own.

Conscientious rights and objective truth.

Christ and Pilate were speaking on different wavelengths. There was an immense gap between their two minds. If modern man is as sceptical as Pilate about the existence of objective religious or moral truth, does this not mean that there is an equally immense gap between the mind of Christ and that of modern man?

Perhaps, but it is also possible that modern man, or at least modern Western man, has one important advantage over Pilate, an advantage that is worth considering. We know nothing of Pilate’s views on conscience, specifically on the rights of individual conscience. As a Roman Governor, a practically absolute ruler in his Province, he probably didn’t believe in them. In the case before him, our Lord’s own case, he certainly didn’t respect them. Modern man, however, even though he may claim not to believe in any objective truth, does believe strongly in the rights of conscience.

Now if one reflects on this, one discovers an inconsistency, a very hopeful inconsistency which suggests precisely that modern man is not in practice so absolutely sceptical about the possibility of objective truth as he thinks himself to be, or as we may think him to be.

In effect, all those who invoke the rights of conscience eg. as against the authority of the State are appealing to some standard of justice that, for them, stands higher and is truer than any man made disposition or law.

Those who campaign against class prejudice, racial discrimination, mass genocide, colonialism, imperialism, or atomic warfare, do so in the firm belief that these things are wrong even if a particular group or government or law approves them; that they are wrong always and everywhere; that they are wrong and cannot be willed, or legislated, to be right; that they are wrong in themselves and that no collective will, and no individual will, can make them right.

But it is not possible to maintain this position unless one believes in a higher truth, an objective truth, that stands above laws and Parliaments and demands their respect; a higher truth that stands equally above the will of any individual and demands his respect also.

This last point perhaps needs to be emphasised. The civil rights movement cannot be interpreted as a campaign to free each individual from loyalty or subjection to the State, and to make the individual will supreme. If it were, then no one would have the right to protest, for example, against the actions of Pilate or Hitler, who after all were certainly following their own individual will, and were presumably following their own subjective 'truth' and, according to such an interpretation, would have been right to do so.

Genuine civil rights protests are made in the name of humanity, ie. in the name of a higher truth valid for the human race and demanding respect from all men. The essential philosophy of the civil rights movement demands a higher court of appeal a court of more ultimate truth where the morality (the truth or falsehood, the rightness or wrongness) of laws and actions can be finally judged.

The Catholic and Protestant conscience.

This idea, that there exists a truth which is higher than man made laws or individual choices and which should be respected by them was universal in Christendom until the sixteenth century. The Reformation did not, at first, seem to affect this Christian belief in the existence of an objective and ultimate truth, standing outside man's mind, standing higher than man's mind, and existing even if some or many men fail to see it or fail to respect it. As a movement so largely in revolt against authority, the Reformation was bound eventually to create a crisis about the objective nature of truth (for truth and authority are intimately connected. See Crisis Conscience and Authority, C.T.S. Do 445). Yet, we repeat, it did not at first seem to affect the basic Christian confidence in the objective truth. It simply sought to modify the means by which, in religious and moral matters, the individual was to attain that truth. There was now the Catholic and the Protestant approach to this question; there was, in morality, the Catholic and the Protestant conscience.

The Catholic conscience supplemented its intimate efforts to distinguish between right and wrong by looking to externally given norms which, as coming from God himself (speaking, with authority, not only in his Incarnation but also in his continued life in his Church), it welcomed as certainly true.

The Protestant conscience, in its sensitivity to moral truth, was offered the aid and apparent guarantee of an external objective norm that of our Lord's teaching in Scripture. But, in practice, this was to have less and less value, for the 'objective' norm of the Gospel was subordinated to the ultimate 'guaranteeing' principle of Protestantism, that of private judgment.

Despite this principle, however, it is true to say that, at the time of the Reformation and for long after, the Reformed ethic did not wish to deny the existence of the objective truth of the norms of morality, but simply said that the knowledge of these norms may be attained by a personal or private (and therefore, in the end, by a subjective) interpretation of the teaching of Christ.

In other words, the Catholic believed that the ultimate guide to personal conscience, as it endeavours to find religious and moral truth by applying our Lord's teaching to human life, lay in an external authority and tradition guaranteed by God, while the Protestant believed that the ultimate guide to personal conscience in interpreting or applying the Gospel must be conscience itself.

Two contrasting concepts of conscience, then, and of the relation of conscience to the truth. Two contrasting concepts of conscience, each wishing to be sensitive to the truth, but one with a tendency and a disposition to check whatever presented itself from within as the voice of truth, against an external and objective authority, and the other with an ultimate tendency to subordinate whatever spoke authoritatively from outside (Scripture, Tradition) to an interior and personal interpretation; the Catholic conscience with a tendency to look outwards (and upwards) to external norms which represent a final court of judgment sustained by a divine guarantee, and the Protestant conscience with an ultimate tendency to look inwards where, in the last analysis, the voice of God speaks in the depths of each individual soul.

The difference between these two concepts is enormous. Nevertheless, they still had a very important meeting ground in common, insofar as both not only accepted the existence of objective truth, but regarded conscience as a faculty capable of arriving at this truth. Both, in other words, regarded conscience as a truth-seeking faculty (and, naturally, a truth-finding faculty).(6)

This is a very important meeting ground. One perhaps only realises its importance by considering the situation when it disappears, when the Private Judgment position reaches a point to which its development tends inevitably to take it where faith in the existence of objective truth is gone.

Can conscience create the truth?

It is vital to grasp this difference between the original Protestant position and what one might call the modern post-Protestant attitude which prevails in Western liberal (or post-liberal) societies and influences the thinking of all of us. The original Protestant position simply held that man's mind or conscience is capable of finding truth religious and moral truth 'on its own', without having to follow any external guide. The important thing here is that this position still allows, at least in theory, the existence of a truth that conscience can relate to. It accepts, so to speak, the pre-existence of truth in relation to conscience.

It is a very different thing indeed to hold, however obscurely, that conscience determines or creates truth. This is in fact the real position of many people today. Freedom of conscience, freedom to seek the truth, is nowadays being made synonymous with 'autonomy' of conscience freedom to 'create' the truth...

There is of course an intrinsic absurdity in the concept of a 'truth-creating' faculty. Insofar as it can be used, however, it shows the infinite rift between the modern positivistic-sceptic mind and the Catholic mind. Once truth is thought of as something that can be created, one is clearly talking about something totally different from what a Catholic means by truth.

One doesn't create truth. Truth is uncreated. It is not an invention of man. It may be discovered by him, but not invented. It is not subordinated to man or to his conscience. The truth is higher than conscience and independent of it. The man who denies this, who makes truth in some way subordinated to his own mind, who is prepared to treat it as the subjective creation of his own mind,

is not talking about the truth at all. He should use a different term: value judgment, personal standard, or perhaps personal interest or preference or convenience...

Conscience must look up to the truth.

Truth is independent of conscience. But conscience is not independent of truth. In your conscientious choices, you don't really choose the truth as if it were one truth presenting itself out of several possible truths. One truth, one only, presents itself to the mind as true, and you either accept it or you reject it. But even if you reject it, it remains present to you as true. You cannot get rid of it. However much you try to subject it to your mind, you fail. For the truth is stronger than your mind.

In the face of its strength a man may turn away, avert his mind from it, declare it out of bounds, closed to further mental consideration ... But in effect, by this he maims his mind. You cannot manipulate the truth, you cannot create your own truths. You can only do that with falsehood.

Of course, many men make their own falsehoods and call them true. Falsehood can indeed be manipulated. It is quite malleable. It is easily subordinated to the human mind. For it is the product of the human mind. But the truth stands above man. It is God's product.

Truth, therefore, real truth, is always greater than the human mind. It must be respected and sought with humility. It must be looked upto. A man is really acting according to his conscience only when he is looking up in his actions, when he is following a standard of truth that is above him, that he respects and tries to measure up to.(7)

If conscience is to preserve its proper nature as a truth-seeking faculty, it must preserve this attitude of humility. Pride is always trying to assert itself. If it is permitted to do so, it will tend to adopt an attitude of domination towards the truth. And it is then that conscience emerges with the pretensions of a truth-creating faculty.

The original temptation.

The biggest human dilemma in fact lies in how to approach the truth: whether to treat it humbly or dominatingly. The most basic temptation is found here. As is the most basic sin the original sin, that is at the origin of all sin and consists in yielding to the temptation to manipulate, to dominate, the truth.

It is peculiar that some Christians today seem to find such difficulty in the biblical account of Original Sin. The account, the whole doctrine, of course makes no sense if one reads it as the colossal punishment of a trivial act of disobedience towards a quite arbitrary command. The whole thing then appears as a sort of deliberate snare set by God in the ridiculous matter of a protected apple tree.

But that is not at all the way it appears in Genesis. The Bible uses symbolic terms, there can be no doubt about that. But symbolic terms about issues that could scarcely be clearer or more radical.

Let us recall the situation. God has commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of one tree: not an apple tree, but the tree 'of the knowledge of good and evil'. This tree of a species unknown to our orchards is clearly a symbol; and the taking of its fruit is clearly a symbol. Symbols of what?

Consider the temptation. God had warned Adam and Eve not to eat or touch the forbidden fruit 'lest you die'. The devil tells them, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes

will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' These last words contain the real temptation, and suggest the greatness of the sin to which they were being tempted.

What exactly are these words getting at? Adam and Eve already knew good. They knew that God was good, and that everything willed by God must be good, and anything against his will must be evil. They knew then that to disobey him would be evil. But they were being tempted not just to disobey one isolated and rather petty expression of God's will. They were being tempted, in their minds, to the greatest possible sin of pride against divine and uncreated Truth. They were being tempted to reject or rather to think they could reject the limitations of creaturehood, the necessary subordination of the creature's mind to objective truth. They were being tempted to manipulate and abuse the truth, to think that the truth can be divided and cut off from its one source and given a new and autonomous existence, that there can be several truths, one standing against another, that the creature's 'truth' should have equal and democratic rights with the Creator's Truth.

It was the temptation to adopt their own standard of right and wrong, to let their own mind (or perhaps, more accurately, their preference) be the standard of good and evil. It was the temptation to be 'like God', determining, legislating, creating good and evil.

It was the temptation of the autonomous conscience. It was a peculiarly modern temptation.

Let us be clear on this. Adam and Eve were not simply being tempted with the suggestion that they could know ie. discover the truth 'on their own'. They were not being tempted to be 'discoverers' of the truth (truth discovered leads to the true God), but to be 'creators', 'inventors', of the truth ('truth' invented ie. falsehood is a false god or serves a false god).

Making abortion 'right'.

How clearly one can see this false idea of the truth today as if it were an arbitrary product of man's will (or even an arbitrary product of God's will! What a false idea in fact Adam and Eve had of the relationship between God and truth!).

How easily modern man would solve moral and social problems: 'Let this be the truth. Let this be right. No; now this other thing ...' This positivistic attitude is deeply rooted in current thinking.

Abortion was 'wrong' in Britain only a few years ago. In 1967 the British Parliament (by a vote, in fact, of less than fifty per cent of the elected representatives of the people) legalised it. Therefore abortion has now become right. A new truth has emerged, has been created, and pushed out the old. The old truth has been abolished.

If Humanae Vitae (The Regulation of Birth, C.T.S. Do 411) was such a stumbling-block to the minds of many people, many Catholics included, it was not necessarily because they were absolutely convinced by the arguments in favour of artificial birth-control, but that they were scandalised at the thought of one man with the power (so it seemed to them) to legislate 'the truth', to change what had been wrong into what could now be right, by a mere 'fiat', by a simple act of his will and refusing to do it!

Conscience versus community.

The idea that individual conscience lies above the truth, and that therefore each man can construct his own world of good and evil, his own system of right and wrong, within his autonomous conscience, leads to individualism, isolationism, lack of solidarity, rejection of community; and is, inevitably and in the end, destructive of the very idea of humanity.

If each man's mind is supreme, then all men have potentially different standards, they find no links in a shared humanity, there is no common ground between them. Dialogue and trust become impossible. Mankind fragments.

If men cannot look up together to God or at least to a higher truth then they will not for long be able to think or work or act or live together.

If modern man, in ever greater numbers, seems to be despairing of that 'togetherness' which was so generally sought only a very few years ago, if he no longer trusts the larger communities of State or Church, if so much of life appears to him as a 'rat-race', if he looks with suspicion on his fellow-men, if he seems increasingly sceptical even about life within the more intimate community of the family, if he finds himself being pushed or drifting more and more out on his own, one wonders if this may not be the final stage of disintegration of a humanity where minds, having first lost regard for, have finally lost sight of, their one common meeting ground, the truth.

Footnotes.

1. We have a grave duty to follow our conscience. We have, however, an equally grave duty to form our conscience. These two duties bind us always. Further, they are co-relative duties; ie. insofar as we are not continually trying to form our conscience, we are, to that extent, depriving ourselves of the right to feel at ease in following our conscience.
2. The question of the rightness or wrongness of conscience should be clearly distinguished from that of good faith, of the sincerity of conscience. A man may be perfectly sincere in his conscience. He may believe that the principles he follows in his actions are sound and true principles of human conduct and development. He may be quite sincere in this belief; and he may be quite mistaken. If he is mistaken, despite his sincerity, the principles he follows in his actions may lead him on to a frustrated and unhappy human life. Just as a man may sincerely choose a road he believes leads to Birmingham. But if he is mistaken in his choice, if the road he is following does not actually go to Birmingham, his sincerity will not get him there. This is not to say that sincerity is no safeguard to conscience. It is a safeguard in the sense that the man who is truly and deeply sincere, and humble enough to acknowledge his need for guidance, will normally come to see where his principles have gone astray and be in a position to correct them. We will return to this point later.
3. Cf. Ward, Life, II, 404.
4. An episode in the Gospel (Mk 11: 27 33) shows the disastrous effect of insincerity. A group of priests and religious leaders of the Jews approach our Lord to interrogate him: 'What authority have you for acting like this? Or who gave you authority to do these things?' He is prepared to answer their interrogation, provided first that they are prepared to be sincere and to interrogate themselves. He asks them first to tell him their opinion about John's baptism, whether it came 'from heaven' (having divine approval), or simply 'from man' (and therefore commanding no special respect). But they do not give him their opinion, not their real opinion, not their opinion in conscience. They do not ask themselves what they really believe in their hearts to be the truth, to be right or wrong. They simply weigh up the consequences of different answers, trying to find one which might suit their convenience: 'If we say from heaven, he will say, "Then why did you refuse to believe him?" But dare we say from man?' ('for', adds the Gospel, 'they had the people to fear, for everyone held that John was a real prophet'). Though religious leaders, they are not men of principle. They are

’practical’ men, men of policy. As far as their own convenience goes, they reason intelligently. But they will go no further in their reasoning. They are men in whom convenience has taken the place of conscience. In the Gospel event they find no convenient answer to our Lord’s interrogation. And convenience or rather inconvenience pleads ignorance: ’We do not know’. Our Lord’s reaction to their insincerity is also significant: ’Nor will I tell you my authority for acting like this’. It is as if he were saying, ’If you are not prepared to be sincere, to look into your hearts and face the truth, then there is no use in our pretending to talk. I cannot communicate with you, nor you with me.’ And so it is in practice. The person whose life is not ruled by sincerity, by readiness to face up to the truth or to the demands of conscience, however inconvenient or exacting, cuts himself off from divine communication. The man who is afraid to face his conscience is in effect afraid to face God, and only those who face God can be in touch with him.

5. The advice of another Christian and especially a priest’s advice, in questions of faith and morals, is a powerful help for knowing what God wants of us in our particular circumstances. Advice, however, does not eliminate personal responsibility. In the end, it is we ourselves, each one of us on our own, who have to decide for ourselves and personally account to God for our decisions.’ J. Escriva de Balaguer, in Conversations with Mgr Escriva, Scepter Books, p. 111.

6. Strictly speaking, as we have said earlier, conscience is that faculty for making judgments in relation to the rightness or wrongness of one’s conduct, ie. in relation to practical moral truth. Conscience therefore cannot operate except on the basis of a grasp of truth (or what it takes to be truth), and this means that in practice it must maintain a certain attitude towards the question of truth. This is why I introduce and would wish to underline the enormously important distinction between the ’truth-seeking’ attitude and the ’truth-creating’ attitude; the attitude of respect or the attitude of domination in relation to the truth. Some philosophically minded readers may feel that at this stage one is speaking of a function of the intelligence rather than of conscience. I would not argue the point, since I feel that the distinction is not important to the non-philosophical reader.

7. He is not acting according to conscience if he is acting simply according to convenience, shaping his actions to suit his pride or interest or pleasure; or perhaps, rather, shaping his principles to suit his actions. The man of flexible principles is in constant danger of becoming a man of no principles at all.
