

THE DIGNITY OF CONSCIENCE

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‘CONSCIENCE’ is a word of which we ought to be proud. It proclaims that the criterion of good and evil lies within the individual man. Whatever orders he may be called upon to obey, in the last resort a man relies on the interior judgment which says ‘Yes, I ought to act in this way’, or ‘No, it would be sinful to do that.’ Through his conscience, a man is finally accountable to himself alone; or rather, he is freed from that merely human authority under which so many people find themselves.

It was the moralists such as Cicero and Seneca who first gave conscience a prominent place, at least in so far as the examination of past actions is concerned. St Paul, who introduced the notion into the Christian tradition, extended it to the control of future actions as well. Here it has no easy part to play, and gives rise to many problems. The scholastic theologians who discussed the extent to which its judgments should be followed, held that it may sometimes be mistaken, for it may consider that something is good which in reality is evil, and vice versa. But it was St Thomas above all who insisted on the authority of conscience, declaring that its ruling must be followed even if it is mistaken, though he added that a man who acts in this way is not necessarily free from blame. The man must obey his erroneous conscience, but in doing so he sins if he could have corrected it; the only solution for him is to alter his conscience by bringing it into agreement with the truth.

The importance given to conscience in St Thomas’s teaching is perhaps most clearly seen in his examination of the conflict that may occur between a subject and his superior. He takes the extreme case of a religious, bound by a vow of obedience, who disagrees with his legitimate superior over a line of conduct to be taken. As it is admitted that such a conflict can arise, it will be instructive for us to consider St Thomas’s solution of it. We have only to follow

his reasoning in the *Q. D. de Veritate*, qu. 17, art. 5,¹ making some use of relevant passages in other works.

It must first be decided which of these two contradictory demands takes place over the other. It might be thought that the order of a superior, whose authority is from God, is absolutely binding on the conscience of a subject who by his vows has given up the use of his own will. Yet this is not the opinion of St Thomas, who considers that the law of God supports the subject's conscience, in relation to which the order of the superior is only that of another man. For he insists that the authority of a religious superior, though certainly of divine origin, cannot replace the natural duty which every man has to act according to his own judgment but that the two ought to be in harmony. Nothing can replace the necessity to judge whether or not to carry out the order. St Thomas makes it clear that a judgment about the order itself is not permissible to the subject, who would be setting himself up as a superior, in refusing to admit the difference between those who can command and those who must obey. But unless the subject carefully judges whether or not the order should be carried out, he will no longer be responsible for his own actions. There is no means of giving up that responsibility, no state of life or demand of obedience that can overcome the demand of nature: *omnis enim homo debet secundum rationem agere*. No order given by another man can be an immediate principle of action: the subject must always make a personal decision whether or not he ought to obey, and this decision will then be law for him. Otherwise we should have to say that God has destroyed man's dignity by the foundation of hierarchic authority, cancelling in a later dispensation what he first established. Such a position is even less defensible in view of the clear statements of Scripture about the supremacy of conscience: so that St Thomas can say in this article, refer-

¹ These *quaestiones disputatae* must belong to St Thomas's first teaching period at Paris. Qu. 17 is assigned to the scholastic year 1257-58. Thomists and spiritual writers seem to have paid little attention to the important question raised here by St Thomas, or to the teaching (which may well be called liberating) that he defends. Unfortunately the usual editions have a corrupt text of the article in question. It is corrected in the *Bulletin Thomiste* VII (1943-46), p. 80.

ring to the arguments *sed contra* of article 3, that the authority of conscience is founded on a positive law of God as well as on a natural right. If the subject's conscience agrees with the order he has been given, there will be no further difficulty; but it may happen that he decides it would be morally wrong to obey the order, and it is this conflict that we have to resolve. It is clear from what has been said that we must hold that the subject is bound by his conscience, so that he will sin if he acts against it merely because this is the wish of his superior. It is a case where we must apply those bold words, 'We ought to obey God rather than men'.

But to stop at this point in the argument would be to leave the way open to every kind of insubordination. St Thomas does not make that mistake: he introduces an important distinction. The subject's conscience must be either true or erroneous. We have seen that he ought not to act against his conscience even if it happens to be erroneous; but in this case it gives him no guarantee that his action is a right one. He may still sin by disobeying the order, though less gravely than he would have done by obeying it, since he would then be breaking a commandment of God. Thus he may be held responsible for his error: and this will certainly be so if he disobeys in conscience simply because he views the matter differently from his superior, or considers that the latter is behaving imprudently (assuming that the limits of authority have not been overstepped, and that no higher one is being contradicted). He must therefore try to reach a truer idea of what it is to be a subject; with such an alteration of conscience the conflict will disappear. For he is bound to make every effort to discover the truth, if a doctrine so favourable to conscience is to be applied. Otherwise the subject will have made it a sacred duty to follow a mere illusion, and where he imagines he has shown unshakable virtue will actually have committed sin.

On the other hand the conscience may be correct in judging that it is morally impossible to carry out the order. Clearly the subject ought not to obey under these circumstances, since the commandments of God are higher than those of men. The superior, unless he realises his mistake

and comes to admire this virtuous refusal, will believe that his subject has acted disobediently whereas in fact he has been completely obedient and merits the highest praise.

As we have said, other passages in St Thomas's works treat of the opposition by which a subject is bound in conscience to act against his superior's will if he is to avoid laxity and sin. For instance, a religious who has been told a secret, on condition of his promising to keep it, may be asked to disclose it to his superior. St Thomas considers that he ought to do this if the general good might otherwise suffer, because then the promise cannot have been a valid one (assuming the information was not given in confession, when it must be kept secret under any circumstances). But where this is not so, no one can force the religious to break his promise. His conscience will rightly judge that he ought to remain silent, however insistent or even threatening his superior may become.² There is an absolute rule of conscience that it is wrong to betray a trust, and on this the order can have no bearing, with whatever good intentions the religious may try to justify it. He is bound to follow the dictates of his conscience, even though this leads him to act contrary to the human authority which in other respects he ought to obey.

Again, the members of a religious community may be ordered by their superior to inform him of a sin, otherwise secret, committed by one of their number. There are several distinctions to be made in this second case. If some knowledge of the affair has already got about, the superior's order will amount to the opening of a judicial inquiry, which will punish the culprit and perhaps save the community; the religious ought then to tell the superior what they know. But if there is no public knowledge of the sin, and no question of a judicial inquiry, a subject should first consider whether the sin is past and done with, or whether it may still threaten the community in future. Should that be so, the subject ought not to keep silent, in so far as punishment of the culprit is the only way to avoid harm to all. But if

² *Quodlibet* I, art. 15. *Quodlibet* I, as also IV (cf. note 3) belongs to St Thomas's second period of teaching in Paris; that is, during the last years of his career.

there is no future threat to the community, a religious should first correct his brother in private, as the gospel lays down; if this has no effect, he is to repeat the correction before two or three witnesses, and only then, if the culprit persists in his action, should the authorities be told, since this seems the only way of bringing about his amendment. Conscience cannot permit the wishes of the superior to be followed without question in such a case. The gospel precept, so clearly intended to be the means of releasing the man from sin, must come first. Once again the truth itself forbids an obedience which would be a grave sin in the eyes of him who knows the depths of our hearts.³

But we should note in this last example that special care and attention are needed to discover the right action to take. Where we are seeking the truth, sincerity is not enough; it does not exclude error, and we know that error does not necessarily free us from blame. In the service of truth, every effort to avoid error must be made. In a case of conflict, the subject should be especially reluctant to conclude that he is right and his superior wrong. It may even be wise to try to understand just why the order in question has been given. But if no amount of effort will resolve the conflict, and the subject is clear that his conscience forbids him to do as he has been told, then the only right action is to disobey his superior. It is the sole way of fulfilling the will of God, which can be known with certainty through a true conscience.

There is no doubt that this is the genuine teaching of St Thomas, and we have the right to extend the principle he has laid down to other cases. Moreover, his authority as a theologian allows us to say that his teaching on this point is approved by the Catholic Church. Whatever abuses may have arisen, whether through the tyranny of superiors or the cowardice of subjects, it is certain that the human conscience once fixed in truth can withstand all oppression. Finally, we can but express the hope that everyone, in all circumstances, will show a degree of courage that corresponds to the dignity of his conscience.

³ *Quodlibet* I, art. 16; *Quodlibet* IV, art. 12. The same solution is given in the *Summa*, IIa IIae, qu. 33, art. 7, ad 5m.