

## THE DOMINICAN CONSCIENCE

THERE is something fine in the way St. Paul proclaims the great importance and value before God, though not the independence, of the human conscience. He says that whatever does not proceed from conscience, whatever is not in conformity with it, is sin. This statement contains something of a psychological mystery; for conscience may be misinformed, yet we are obliged to follow it. Now although St. Paul admits, especially in practical matters and in doubtful cases, the decisive power of conscience, and although he is ready to grant that a man may be in good faith, yet, at the same time, in error, still he does not teach that everything which proceeds from conscience is really the voice of God, but only that which proceeds from conscience duly and properly instructed. At one and the same time, St. Paul recognizes in conscience a certain autonomy and yet he also realizes the obligation upon conscience of watching over its motives. Now without pretending that the Dominican conscience differs from that of other men, I maintain that there is a special note, a Dominican accent, so to speak, in its dictates.

Although at every hand's turn and at every moment Dominicans find themselves confronted with precise rules and regulations, yet a characteristic feature of their legislation is respect for individual responsibility. To begin with St. Dominic; there is not the slightest doubt about the firmness with which he exercised his authority, yet he does not rule with a rod of iron, but allows scope among those who obey for a certain freedom and spontaneity. Thus, in 1219, in face of the difficulties over the transferring of the Sisters from S. Maria in Trastevere to S. Sisto, we see him releasing the nuns from their promise, and asking for a free renewal of their profession.

Still more remarkable is the fact that, when obliged by Innocent III to rally his followers under one or other of the ancient Rules, he never dreamt of making his choice without consulting his brethren: the primitive chronicler never attri-

## THE DOMINICAN CONSCIENCE

butes the selection to him alone, but to a collective and unanimous decision.

Finally, this respect for individual responsibility is attested, signed and sealed for all time by St. Dominic's refusal to bind his sons under pain of sin to the observance of the Constitutions. Such a spirit, which is the glory of the ancient monastic foundations, implies a perfect relationship between superiors and subjects. The absolute honesty of the subject should always be presupposed in the rulings and decisions of authority. Suspicion is quite alien to their spirit. Authority ought not to have recourse to a petty diplomacy in order to obtain obedience, but should openly appeal to loyalty, to supernatural motives and to the religious responsibility of the subject. Still less should authority fall back on that system of governing employed by some modern politicians in order to rule their majorities, which we may term the government of men through their passions. Nothing is more sad than to see a superior who lacks the courage to ask straight out from his subject an effort or a sacrifice in the name of obedience. It is indeed a bad look-out for the community, and is very often the first step towards its downfall. Where such a state of things exists the subjects, instead of congratulating themselves on being spared, ought to feel themselves degraded and put to shame.

The superior who gives credit to his subjects for generosity calls forth confidence from those he rules. It is to be remarked that it needs as much nobility of mind to trust as to inspire trust: suspicion is just as unbecoming in the subject as it is in the superior. Confidence sums up all the dispositions of the obedient mind: trust is the last blossom and crown of obedience. Confidence may be sorely tried; but even the defects in authority can often be overcome by the persevering and unanimous confidence of the subjects. One may ask whether the dissolution of common life, through disunion between superiors and subjects, comes about through the fault of the former or of the latter. There is not the slightest doubt that, in the majority of cases, the subjects are to blame, if only for this reason, that the superior, being elected by them, ought never to be utterly discredited by

## BLACKFRIARS

them and treated as a pariah. The subject who acts ignobly at the end of the term of office of his superior, is quite capable of acting ignobly at the election of a new superior.

The principle of dispensation, so forcibly expressed in the Dominican Constitutions, which happily balances and tempers the complex and difficult elements of Dominican life, is also, or at least ought to be, an original principle of nobility in the Dominican conscience. In this respect, the important thing is to use and not to abuse. Just as refinement of taste consists mainly in not insisting, so refinement of feeling consists in not abusing. For the majority of people it must seem the more obvious and, in a sense, the easier way to be men of extremes and to go the whole length rather than to keep to the ideal rule of moderation. At first sight the rules of the Order may appear extremely rigid, but dispensation is as much a part of its Constitutions as any of the other laws, and of equally general application. Even when the superior takes the first step in dispensing, a great share of the responsibility still rests with the subject. If he is not so perfect as to feel positive suffering in using a dispensation, he must at least use it with tact and delicacy and with a spirit of mortification. The principle in the Dominican conscience which corresponds to the large and generous principle of dispensation is a willing adaptability to this or that measure of dispensation or restriction. It is obvious that the members may have to pass from one environment or sphere of activity to another, from one country to another, from this function to that. They must bring to these changes an equanimity, a self-forgetfulness which comes from true nobility of soul, a self-subduing force, rather than a mere indifference of will. The more dispensations and privileges a religious receives, the less he should take root in them. Nothing is less easy to bear gracefully than the exceptional; it is in the use of exceptions that a man's true worth is made manifest. Noble natures are simple in the exceptional, and uncommon in common things.

In order to pick out the distinctive note in the Dominican conscience we must examine the motives which should chiefly weigh with the members of the Order and are part and parcel

of their lives. Their long metaphysical training should not only enrich and strengthen the mind but primarily give them *the sense of order*.

They are perpetually occupied in establishing the exact definition of things, in formulating laws and relations, and thus should develop orderly minds, putting order into their ideas and their ideas into order. In St. Thomas's words: *Ordo pertinet ad rationem sicut ad ordinantem* (IIa IIae, q. 26, art. 1): order belongs to reason as to its cause. Now conscience, which signifies the habit of first moral principles, is a function of reason and therefore it should normally follow the development of reason. It should display order in itself and it should put order into our moral life in proportion to that life's development. The idea of order should attract a Dominican for its own sake; it ought to be the beacon-light of his intellectual and moral life. It bears in itself all the beauty of Platonic ideas and the depth and precision of Aristotelian concepts. He should have no concern for anything which is out of place, whatever be its charm or its material value. Any wilful violation of order should repel and disgust. We use the term *monstrosity* for certain exceptionally grievous moral transgressions: indeed, any violation of the essential order of things holds its place in the scale of monstrosities. Such a love of order is the first requisite for a healthy condition of mind and conscience; it constitutes intellectual honesty, right mindedness and moral integrity.

Such a conception of order, held by the mind and loved with the will, gives to conscience its true Dominican character. Since, according to St. Thomas, order always relates to a principle (*ordo attenditur secundum comparationem ad aliquod principium*) it follows that whenever a principle, either logical or causal, is imperilled, we must fly to defend it. Zeal for supernatural principles is the highest form of justice, and the highest motive of conscience. This is a distinctive feature of the Dominican conscience, which insists that principles are imperishable and supremely worth dying for.

The sense of discipline, which is also an important motive of conscience, derives equally from the sense of order, or

rather is its elementary application. When obedience is closely linked with the fundamental and supernatural sense of order, then it reaches its perfection and becomes in reality the *rationabile obsequium*—the reasonable service—which makes us not only obedient to the law but also docile to the spirit of the law. The sense of discipline also makes us believe that we have something to learn from others, and prevents us posing as originators or inventors. In the Dominican Order, on the contrary, the sense of tradition prevails. Loyalty to the Church and reverence for her ancient Doctors are distinctive features of the Dominican conscience.

Finally, a love of order produces a willing subordination of individual interests to the general law and to the common good. St. Thomas says that order belongs, as to its subject, rather to charity than to faith: *ordo magis appropriatur charitati quam fidei (Ibid.)*; that is to say, it is the function of charity to carry out the subordination of different kinds of particular good to the common good of all, and of minor laws to the general and supreme law. This is the vital motive of conscience which leads those possessed of it to their essential and supreme end—the perfection of charity. Now it seems to me that the maintenance of charity first in its *appreciative* and then in its *intensive* power, is a characteristic of Dominican teaching and asceticism. Hence the insistence on the teaching of St. Augustine, in the Rule: *non propria communibus, sed communia propriis praeferantur* (the common good is to be preferred to our own private and merely selfish interests).

The Dominican spirit, for those who are faithful to it, imparts true greatness to conscience. The training which goes to its formation gives that manly strength and lofty elevation of motives which alone can guarantee the ultimate perfection of conscience implied in those significant words of St. Augustine: *Ille juste et sancte vivit, qui rerum integer aestimator est (De Doct. Chr., c. xxvii)*. He is just and holy who sees things whole and who estimates everything with integrity.

HUMBERT CLERISSAC, O.P.

*Translated and revised by Bernard Delany, O.P.*