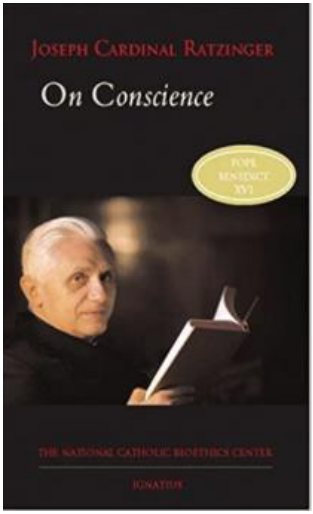

On Conscience

By Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, 1991

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In the contemporary discussion on what constitutes the essence of morality and how it can be recognized, the question of conscience has become paramount especially in the field of Catholic moral theology. This discussion centers on the concepts of freedom and norm, autonomy and heteronomy, self-determination and external determination by authority. Conscience appears here as the bulwark of freedom in contrast to the encroachments of authority on existence. In the course of this, two notions of the Catholic are set in opposition to each other. One is a renewed understanding of the Catholic essence which expounds Christian faith from the basis of freedom and as the very principle of freedom itself. The other is a superseded, "pre-conciliar" model which subjects Christian existence to authority, regulating life even into its most intimate preserves,

and thereby attempts to maintain control over people's lives. Morality of conscience and morality of authority as two opposing models, appear to be locked in struggle with each other. Accordingly, the freedom of the Christian would be rescued by appeal to the classical principle of moral tradition that conscience is the highest norm which man is to follow even in opposition to authority. Authority in this case, the Magisterium, may well speak of matters moral, but only in the sense of presenting conscience with material for its own deliberation. Conscience would retain, however, the final word. Some authors reduce conscience in this its aspect of final arbiter to the formula: conscience is infallible.

Nonetheless, at this point, a contradiction can arise. It is of course undisputed that one must follow a certain conscience or at least not act against it. But whether the judgment of conscience or what one takes to be such, is always right, indeed whether it is infallible, is another question. For if this were the case, it would mean that there is no truth—at least not in moral and religious matters, which is to say, in the areas which constitute the very pillars of our existence. For judgments of conscience can contradict each other. Thus there could be at best the subject's own truth, which would be reduced to the subject's sincerity. No door or window would lead from the subject into the broader world of being and human solidarity. Whoever thinks this through will come to the realization that no real freedom exists then and that the supposed pronouncements of conscience are but the reflection of social circumstances. This should necessarily lead to the conclusion that placing freedom in opposition to authority overlooks something. There must be

something deeper, if freedom and, therefore, human existence are to have meaning.

1. A Conversation On The Erroneous Conscience And First Inferences

It has become apparent that the question of conscience leads in fact to the core of the moral problem and thus to the question of man's existence itself. I would now like to pursue this question not in the form of a strictly conceptual and therefore unavoidably abstract presentation, but by way of narrative, as one might say today, by relating, to begin with, the story of my own encounter with this problem.

I first became aware of the question with all its urgency in the beginning of my academic teaching. In the course of a dispute, a senior colleague, who was keenly aware of the plight to being Christian in our times, expressed the opinion that one should actually be grateful to God that He allows there to be so many unbelievers in good conscience. For if their eyes were opened and they became believers, they would not be capable, in this world of ours, of bearing the burden of faith with all its moral obligations. But as it is, since they can go another way in good conscience, they can reach salvation. What shocked me about this assertion was not in the first place the idea of an erroneous conscience given by God Himself in order to save men by means of such artfulness—the idea, so to speak, of a blindness sent by God for the salvation of those in question. What disturbed me was the notion that it harbored, that faith is a burden which can hardly be borne and which no doubt was intended only for stronger natures—faith almost as a kind of punishment, in any case, an imposition not easily coped with. According to this view, faith would not make salvation easier

but harder. Being happy would mean not being burdened with having to believe or having to submit to the moral yoke of the faith of the Catholic church. The erroneous conscience, which makes life easier and marks a more human course, would then be a real grace, the normal way to salvation. Untruth, keeping truth at bay, would be better for man than truth. It would not be the truth that would set him free, but rather he would have to be freed from the truth. Man would be more at home in the dark than in the light. Faith would not be the good gift of the good God but instead an affliction. If this were the state of affairs, how could faith give rise to joy? Who would have the courage to pass faith on to others? Would it not be better to spare them the truth or even keep them from it? In the last few decades, notions of this sort have discernibly crippled the disposition to evangelize. The one who sees the faith as a heavy burden or as a moral imposition is unable to invite others to believe. Rather he lets them be, in the putative freedom of their good consciences.

The one who spoke in this manner was a sincere believer, and, I would say, a strict Catholic who performed his moral duty with care and conviction. But he expressed a form of experience of faith which is disquieting. Its propagation could only be fatal to the faith. The almost traumatic aversion many have to what they hold to be "pre-conciliar" Catholicism is rooted, I am convinced, in the encounter with such a faith seen only as encumbrance. In this regard, to be sure, some very basic questions arise. Can such a faith actually be an encounter with truth? Is the truth about God and man so sad and difficult, or does truth not lie in the overcoming of such legalism? Does it not lie in freedom? But where does freedom lead? What course does it chart for us? At the conclusion, we shall come back to

these fundamental problems of Christian existence today but before we do that, we must return to the core of our topic, namely, the matter of conscience. As I said, what unsettled me in the argument just recounted was first of all the caricature of faith I perceived in it. In a second course of reflection, it occurred to me further that the concept of conscience which it implied must also be wrong. The erroneous conscience, by sheltering the person from the exacting demands of truth, saves him ...—thus went the argument. Conscience appeared here not as a window through which one can see outward to that common truth which founds and sustains us all, and so makes possible through the common recognition of truth, the community of needs and responsibilities. Conscience here does not mean man's openness to the ground of his being, the power of perception for what is highest and most essential. Rather, it appears as subjectivity's protective shell into which man can escape and there hide from reality. Liberalism's idea of conscience was in fact presupposed here. Conscience does not open the way to the redemptive road to truth which either does not exist or, if it does, is too demanding. It is the faculty which dispenses from truth. It thereby becomes the justification for subjectivity, which should not like to have itself called into question. Similarly, it becomes the justification for social conformity. As mediating value between the different subjectivities, social conformity is intended to make living together possible. The obligation to seek the truth ceases, as do any doubts about the general inclination of society and what it has become accustomed to. Being convinced of oneself, as well as conforming to others, are sufficient. Man is reduced to his superficial conviction and the less depth he has, the better for him.

What I was only dimly aware of in this conversation became glaringly clear a little later in a dispute among colleagues about the justifying power of the erroneous conscience. Objecting to this thesis, someone countered that if this were so then the Nazi SS would be justified and we should seek them in heaven since they carried out all their atrocities with fanatic conviction and complete certainty of conscience. Another responded with utmost assurance that of course this was indeed the case. There is no doubting the fact that Hitler and his accomplices who were deeply convinced of their cause, could not have acted otherwise. Therefore, the objective terribleness of their deeds notwithstanding, they acted morally, subjectively speaking. Since they followed their albeit mistaken consciences, one would have to recognize their conduct as moral and, as a result, should not doubt their eternal salvation. Since that conversation, I knew with complete certainty that something was wrong with the theory of justifying power of the subjective conscience, that, in other words, a concept of conscience which leads to such conclusions must be false. For, subjective conviction and the lack of doubts and scruples which follow therefrom do not justify man. Some thirty years later, in the terse words of the psychologist Albert Görres I found summarized the perceptions I was trying to articulate. The elaboration of these insights forms the heart of this address. Görres shows that the feeling of guilt, the capacity to recognize guilt, belongs essentially to the spiritual make-up of man. This feeling of guilt disturbs the false calm of conscience and could be called conscience's complaint against my self-satisfied existence. It is as necessary for man as the physical pain which signifies disturbances of normal bodily functioning. Whoever is no longer capable of perceiving guilt is spiritually ill, a "living corpse, a dramatic character's mask," as

Gorres says. "Monsters, among other brutes, are the ones without guilt feelings. Perhaps Hitler did not have any, or Himmler, or Stalin. Maybe Mafia bosses do not have any guilt feelings either, or maybe their remains are just well hidden in the cellar. Even aborted guilt feelings ... All men need guilt feelings."

By the way, a look into Sacred Scripture should have precluded such diagnoses and such a theory of justification by the errant conscience. In Psalm 19:12-13, we find the ever worth pondering passage: "But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from my unknown faults." That is not Old Testament objectivism, but profoundest human wisdom. No longer seeing one's guilt, the falling silent of conscience in so many areas, is an even more dangerous sickness of the soul than the guilt which one still recognizes as such. He who no longer notices that killing is a sin has fallen farther than the one who still recognizes the shamefulness of his actions, because the former is further removed from the truth and conversion. Not without reason does the self- righteous man in the encounter with Jesus appear as the one who is really lost. If the tax collector with all his undisputed sins stands more justified before God than the Pharisee with all his undeniably good works (Lk 18:9-14), this is not because the sins of the tax collector were not sins or the good deeds of the Pharisee not good deeds. Nor does it mean that the good that man does is not good before God, or the evil not evil or at least not particularly important. The reason for this paradoxical judgment of God is shown precisely from our question. The Pharisee no longer knows that he too has guilt. He has a completely clear conscience. But this silence of conscience makes him impenetrable to God and men, while the

cry of conscience which plagues the tax collector makes him capable of truth and love. Jesus can move sinners. Not hiding behind the screen of their erroneous consciences, they have not become unreachable for the change which God expects of them, and of us. He is ineffective with the "righteous," because they are not aware of any need for forgiveness and conversion. Their consciences no longer accuse them but justify them.

We find something similar in Saint Paul who tells us, that the pagans, even without the law, knew quite well what God expected of them (Rom 2:1- 16). The whole theory of salvation through ignorance breaks apart with this verse. There is present in man the truth that is not to be repulsed, that one truth of the creator which in the revelation of salvation history has also been put in writing. Man can see the truth of God from the fact of his creaturehood. Not to see it is guilt. It is not seen because man does not want to see it. The "no" of the will which hinders recognition is guilt. The fact that the signal lamp does not shine is the consequence of a deliberate looking away from that which we do not wish to see.

At this point in our reflections, it is possible to draw some initial conclusions with a view toward answering the question regarding the essence of conscience. We can now say: it will not do to identify man's conscience with the self-consciousness of the I, with it subjective certainty about itself and its moral behavior. On the one hand, this consciousness may be a mere reflection of the social surroundings and the opinions in vogue. On the other hand, it might also derive from a lack of self-criticism, a deficiency in listening to the depth of one's own soul. This diagnosis is confirmed by what has come to light since the fall of Marxist systems in eastern Europe. The noblest and keenest

minds of the liberated peoples speak of an enormous spiritual devastation which appeared in the years of the intellectual deformation. They speak of a blunting of the moral sense which is more significant loss and danger than the economic damage which was done. The new patriarch of Moscow stressed this poignantly in the summer of 1990. The power of perception of people who lived in a system of deception was darkened. The society lost the capacity for mercy, and human feelings were forsaken. A whole generation was lost for the good, lost for humane needs. "We must lead society back to the eternal moral values," that is to say, open ears almost gone deaf, so that once again the promptings of God might be heard in human hearts. Error, the "erring," conscience, is only at first convenient. But then the silencing of conscience leads to the dehumanization of the world and to moral danger, if one does not work against it.

To put it differently, the identification of conscience with superficial consciousness, the reduction of man to his subjectivity, does not liberate but enslaves. It makes us totally dependent on the prevailing opinions and debases these with every passing day. Whoever equates conscience with superficial conviction, identifies conscience with a pseudo-rational certainty, a certainty which in fact has been woven from self-righteousness, conformity and lethargy. Conscience is degraded to a mechanism for rationalization while it should represent the transparency of the subject for the divine and thus constitute the very dignity and greatness of man. Conscience's reduction to subjective certitude betokens at the same time a retreat from truth. When the psalmist in anticipation of Jesus' view of sin and justice pleads for liberation from unconscious guilt, he

points to the following relation. Certainly, one must follow an erroneous conscience. But the departure from truth which took place beforehand and now takes its revenge is the actual guilt which first lulls man into false security and then abandons him in the trackless waste.

2. Newman And Socrates: Guides To Conscience

At this juncture, I would like to make a temporary digression. Before we attempt to formulate reasonable answers to the questions regarding the essence of conscience, we must first widen the basis of our considerations somewhat, going beyond the personal which has thus far constituted our point of departure. To be sure, my purpose is not to try to develop a scholarly study on the history of theories of conscience, a subject on which different contributions have appeared just recently. I would prefer rather to stay with our approach thus far of example and narrative. A first glance should be directed to Cardinal Newman, whose life and work could be designated a single great commentary on the question of conscience. Nor should Newman be treated in a technical way. The given framework does not permit us to weigh the particulars of Newman's concept of conscience. I would simply like to try to indicate the place of conscience in the whole of Newman's life and thought. The insights gained from this will hopefully sharpen our view of present problems and establish the link to history, that is, both to the great witnesses of conscience and to the origin of the Christian doctrine of living according to conscience. When the subject of Newman and conscience is raised, the famous sentence form his letter to the Duke of Norfolk immediately comes to mind:

> "Certainly, 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."

In contrast to the statements of Gladstone, Newman sought to make a clear avowal of the papacy. And in contrast to mistaken forms of ultra-Montanism, Newman embraced an interpretation of the papacy which is only then correctly conceived when it is viewed together with the primacy of conscience, a papacy not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it. Modern man, who presupposes the opposition of authority to subjectivity, has difficulty understanding this. For him, conscience stands on the side of subjectivity and is the expression of the freedom of the subject. Authority, on the other hand, appears to him as the constraint on, threat to and even the negation of, freedom. So then we must go deeper to recover a vision in which this kind of opposition does not obtain.

For Newman, the middle term which establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity is truth. I do not hesitate to say that truth is the central thought of Newman's intellectual grappling. Conscience is central for him because truth stands in the middle. To put it differently, the centrality of the concept conscience for Newman, is linked to the prior centrality of the concept truth and can only be understood from this vantage point. The dominance of the idea of conscience in Newman does not signify that he, in the nineteenth century and in contrast to "objectivistic" neo- scholasticism, espoused a philosophy or theology of subjectivity. Certainly, the subject

finds in Newman an attention which it had not received in Catholic theology perhaps since Saint Augustine. But it is an attention in the line of Augustine and not in that of the subjectivist philosophy of the modern age. On the occasion of his elevation to cardinal, Newman declared that most of his life was a struggle against the spirit of liberalism in religion. We might add, also against Christian subjectivism, as he found it in the Evangelical movement of his time and which admittedly had provided him the first step on his lifelong road to conversion. Conscience for Newman does not mean that the subject is the standard vis-a-vis the claims of authority in a truthless world, a world which lives from the compromise between the claims of the subject and the claims of the social order. Much more than that, conscience signifies the perceptible and demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject himself. It is the overcoming of mere subjectivity in the encounter of the interiority of man with the truth from God. The verse Newman composed in 1833 in Sicily is characteristic: "I loved to choose and see my path but now, lead thou me on!" Newman's conversion to Catholicism was not for him a matter of personal taste or of subjective, spiritual need. He expressed himself on this even in 1844, on the threshold, so to speak of his conversion: "No one can have a more unfavorable view than I of the present state of Roman Catholics." Newman was much more taken by the necessity to obey recognized truth than his own preferences, that is to say, even against his own sensitivity and bonds of friendship and ties due to similar backgrounds. It seems to me characteristic of Newman that he emphasized truth's priority over goodness in the order of virtues. Or, to put it in a way which is more understandable for us, he emphasized truth's priority over consensus, over the accommodation of

groups. I would say, when we are speaking of a man of conscience, we mean one who looks at things this way. A man of conscience is one who never acquires tolerance, well- being, success, public standing, and approval on the part of prevailing opinion, at the expense of truth. In this regard, Newman is related to Britain's other great witness of conscience, Thomas More, for whom conscience was not at all an expression of subjective stubbornness or obstinate heroism. He numbered himself, in fact, among those fainthearted martyrs who only after faltering and much questioning succeed in mustering up obedience to conscience, mustering up obedience to the truth which must stand higher than any human tribunal or any type of personal taste. Thus two standards become apparent for ascertaining the presence of a real voice or conscience. First, conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste. Secondly, conscience cannot be reduced to social advantage, to group consensus or to the demands of political and social power.

Let us take a side-look now at the situation of our day. The individual may not achieve his advancement or well-being at the cost of betraying what he recognizes to be true, nor may humanity. Here we come in contact with the really critical issue of the modern age. The concept of truth has been virtually given up and replaced by the concept of progress. Progress itself "is" truth. But through this seeming exaltation, progress loses its direction and becomes nullified. For if no direction exists, everything can just as well be regress as progress. Einstein's relativity theory properly concerns the physical cosmos. But it seems to me to describe exactly the situation of the intellectual/spiritual world of our time. Relativity theory states there are no fixed systems of reference in the universe. When

we declare a system to be a reference point from which we try to measure a whole, it is we who do the determining. Only in such a way can we attain any results at all. But the determination could always have been done differently. What we said about the physical cosmos is reflected in the second "Copernican revolution" regarding our basic relationship to reality. The truth as such, the absolute, the very reference point of thinking, is no longer visible. For this reason, precisely in the spiritual sense, there is no longer "up or down." There are no directions in a world without fixed measuring points. What we view to be direction is not based on a standard which is true in itself but on our decision and finally on considerations of expediency. In such a relativistic context, so-called teleological or consequentialist ethics ultimately becomes nihilistic, even if it fails to see this. And what is called conscience in such a worldview is, on deeper reflection, but a euphemistic way of saying that there is no such thing as an actual conscience, conscience understood as a "co-knowing" with the truth. Each person determines his own standards. And, needless to say, in general relativity, no one can be of much help to the other, much less prescribe behavior to him.

At this point, the whole radicality of today's dispute over ethics and conscience, its center, becomes plain. It seems to me that the parallel in the history of thought is the quarrel between Socrates-Plato and the sophists in which the fateful decision between two fundamental positions has been rehearsed. There is, on the one hand, the position of confidence in man's capacity for truth. On the other, there is a worldview in which man alone sets standards for himself. The fact that Socrates, the pagan, could become in a certain respect the prophet of Jesus Christ

has its roots in this fundamental question. Socrates' taking up of this question bestowed on the way of philosophizing inspired by him a kind of salvation- historical privilege and made it an appropriate vessel for the Christian Logos. For with the Christian Logos we are dealing with liberation through truth and to truth. If you isolate Socrates' dispute from the accidents of the time and take into account his use of other arguments and terminology, you begin to see how closely this is the same dilemma we face today. Giving up the idea of man's capacity for truth leads first to pure formalism in the use of words and concepts. Again, the loss of content, then and now, leads to a pure formalism of judgment. In many places today, for example, no one bothers any longer to ask what a person thinks. The verdict on someone's thinking is ready at hand as long as you can assign it to its corresponding, formal category: conservative, reactionary, fundamentalist, progressive, revolutionary. Assignment to a formal scheme suffices to render unnecessary coming to terms with the content. The same thing can be seen in more concentrated form, in art. What a work of art says is indifferent. It can glorify God or the devil. The sole standard is that of formal, technical mastery.

We now have arrived at the heart of the matter. Where contents no longer count, where pure praxeology takes over, technique becomes the highest criterion. This means, though, that power becomes the preeminent category whether revolutionary or reactionary. This is precisely the distorted form of being like God of which the account of the fall speaks. The way of mere technical skill, the way of sheer power, is imitation of an idol and not expression of one's being made in the image and likeness of God. What characterizes man as man is not

that he asks about the "can" but about the "should" and that he opens himself to the voice and demands of truth. It seems to me that this was the final meaning of the Socratic search and it is the profoundest element in the witness of all martyrs. They attest to the fact that man's capacity for truth is a limit on all power and a guarantee of man's likeness to God. It is precisely in this way that the martyrs are the great witnesses of conscience, of that capability given to man to perceive the "should" beyond the "can" and thereby render possible real progress, real ascent.

3. Systematic Consequences: The Two Levels of Conscience

A. Anamnesis[1]

After all these ramblings through intellectual history, it is finally time to arrive at some conclusions, that is to formulate a concept of conscience.

The medieval tradition was right, I believe, in according two levels to the concept of conscience. These levels, though they can be well distinguished, must be continually referred to each other. It seems to me that many unacceptable theses regarding conscience are the result of neglecting either the difference or the connection between the two. Mainstream scholasticism expressed these two levels in the concepts synderesis and

[1] the remembering of things from a supposed previous existence (often used with reference to Platonic philosophy).

conscientia. The word synderesis[2] (synteresis) came into the medieval tradition of conscience from the stoic doctrine of the microcosm. It remained unclear in its exact meaning and for this reason became a hindrance to a careful development of this essential aspect of the whole question of conscience. I would like, therefore, without entering into philosophical disputes, to replace this problematic word with the much more clearly defined Platonic concept of anamnesis. It is not only linguistically clearer and philosophically deeper and purer, but anamnesis above all also harmonizes with key motifs of biblical thought and the anthropology derived therefrom. The word anamnesis should be taken to mean exactly what Paul expressed in the second chapter of his Letter to the Romans:

> "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness ..." (2:14 ff.).

The same thought is strikingly amplified in the great monastic rule of Saint Basil. Here we read:

> "The love of God is not founded on a discipline imposed on us from outside, but is constitutively established in us as the capacity and necessity of our rational nature."

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[2] Synderesis “Synderesis” is a technical term from scholastic philosophy, signifying the innate principle in the moral consciousness of every person which directs the agent to good and restrains him from evil. It is first found in a singe passage of St. Jerome (d. 420) in his explanation of the four living creatures in Ezekiel’s vision.

Basil speaks in terms of "the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us," an expression which was to become important in medieval mysticism. In the spirit of Johannine theology, Basil knows that love consists in keeping the commandments. For this reason, the spark of love which has been put into us by the Creator, means this: "We have received interiorly beforehand the capacity and disposition for observing all divine commandments ... These are not something imposed from without." Referring everything back to its simple core, Augustine adds: "We could never judge that one thing is better than another if a basic understanding of the good had not already been instilled in us."

This means that the first so-called ontological level of the phenomenon conscience consists in the fact that something like an original memory of the good and true (both are identical) has been implanted in us, that there is an inner ontological tendency within man, who is created in the likeness of God, toward the divine. From its origin, man's being resonates with some things and clashes with others. This anamnesis of the origin, which results from the godlike constitution of our being is not a conceptually articulated knowing, a store of retrievable contents. It is so to speak an inner sense, a capacity to recall, so that the one whom it addresses, if he is not turned in on himself, hears its echo from within. He sees: "That's it! That is what my nature points to and seeks."

The possibility for, and right to "mission" rest on this anamnesis of the creator which is identical to the ground of our existence. The Gospel may, indeed, must be proclaimed to the pagans because they themselves are yearning for it in the hidden recesses of their souls (cf. Is 42:4). Mission is vindicated then

when those addressed recognize in the encounter with the word of the Gospel that this indeed is what they have been waiting for. In this sense, Paul can say: the Gentiles are a law to themselves—not in the sense of modern liberal notions of autonomy which preclude transcendence of the subject, but in the much deeper sense that nothing belongs less to me than I myself. My own I is the site of the profoundest surpassing of self and contact with Him from whom I came and toward Whom I am going. In these sentences, Paul expresses the experience which he had as missionary to the Gentiles and which Israel may have experienced before him in dealings with the "god-fearing." Israel could have experienced among the Gentiles what the ambassadors of Jesus Christ found reconfirmed. Their proclamation answered an expectation. Their proclamation encountered an antecedent basic knowledge of the essential constants of the will of God which came to be written down in the commandments, which can be found in all cultures and which can be all the more clearly elucidated the less an overbearing cultural bias distorts this primordial knowledge. The more man lives in the "fear of the Lord"—consider the story of Cornelius (especially Acts 10:34-35)—the more concretely and clearly effective this anamnesis becomes.

Again, let us take a formulation of Saint Basil. The love of God which is concrete in the commandments, is not imposed on us from without, the Church Father emphasizes, but has been implanted in us beforehand. The sense for the good has been stamped upon us, Augustine puts it. We can now appreciate Newman's toast first to conscience and then to the Pope. The Pope cannot impose commandments on faithful Catholics because he wants to or finds it expedient. Such a modern,

voluntaristic concept of authority can only distort the true theological meaning of the papacy. The true nature of the Petrine office has become so incomprehensible in the modern age no doubt because we only think of authority in terms which do not allow for bridges between subject and object. Accordingly, everything which does not come from the subject is thought to be externally imposed. But the situation is really quite different according to the anthropology of conscience which through these reflections we have hopefully appreciated. The anamnesis instilled in our being needs, one might say, assistance from without so that it can become aware of itself. But this "from without" is not something set in opposition to anamnesis but ordered to it. It has maieutic function, imposes nothing foreign, but brings to fruition what is proper to anamnesis, namely its interior openness to the truth. When we are dealing with the question of faith and church whose radius extends from the redeeming Logos over the gift of creation, we must, however, take into account yet another dimension which is especially developed in the Johannine writings. John is familiar with the anamnesis of the new "we" which is granted to us in the incorporation into Christ (one Body, i.e., one "I" with Him). In remembering they knew him, so the Gospel has it in a number of places. The original encounter with Jesus gave the disciples what all generations thereafter receive in their foundational encounter with the Lord in Baptism and the Eucharist, namely, the new anamnesis of faith which unfolds, similarly to the anamnesis of creation, in constant dialogue between within and without. In contrast to the presumption of Gnostic teachers who wanted to convince the faithful that their naive faith must be understood and applied much differently, John could say: you do not need such instruction, for as anointed

ones (i.e., baptized) you know everything (cf. 1 Jn 2:20). This does not mean a factual omniscience on the part of the faithful. It does signify, however, the sureness of the Christian memory. This Christian memory, to be sure, is always learning, but proceeding from its sacramental identity, it also distinguishes from within between what is a genuine unfolding of its recollection and what is its destruction or falsification. In the crisis of the Church today, the power of this recollection and the truth of the apostolic word is experienced in an entirely new way where much more so than hierarchical direction, it is the power of memory of the simple faith which leads to the discernment of spirits.

One can only comprehend the primacy of the Pope and its correlation to Christian conscience in this connection. The true sense of this teaching authority of the Pope consists in his being the advocate of the Christian memory. The Pope does not impose from without. Rather, he elucidates the Christian memory and defends it. For this reason the toast to conscience indeed must precede the toast to the Pope because without conscience there would not be a papacy. All power that the papacy has is power of conscience. It is service to the double memory upon which the faith is based and which again and again must be purified, expanded and defended against the destruction of memory which is threatened by a subjectivity forgetful of its own foundation as well as by the pressures of social and cultural conformity.

B) Conscientia

Having considered this first, essentially ontological level of the concept of conscience, we must now turn to its second level, that of judgment and decision which the medieval tradition

designates with the single word conscientia, conscience. Presumably this terminological tradition has not insignificantly contributed to the diminution of the concept of conscience. Thomas, for example, only designates this second level as conscientia. For him it stands to reason that conscience is not a habitus, that is a lasting ontic quality of man, but actus, an event in execution. Thomas of course assumes as given, the ontological foundation of anamnesis (synderesis). He describes anamnesis as an inner repugnance to evil and an attraction to the good. The act of conscience applies this basic knowledge to the particular situation. It is divided according to Thomas into three elements: recognizing (recognoscere), bearing witness (testificari), and finally, judging (judicare). One might speak of an interaction between a function of control and a function of decision. Thomas sees this sequence according to the Aristotelian model of deductive reasoning. But he is careful to emphasize what is peculiar to this knowledge of moral actions whose conclusions do not come from mere knowing or thinking. Whether something is recognized or not, depends too on the will which can block the way to recognition or lead to it. It is dependent, that is to say, on an already formed moral character which can either continue to deform or be further purified. On this level, the level of judgment (conscientia in the narrower sense), it can be said that even the erroneous conscience binds. This statement is completely intelligible from the rational tradition of scholasticism. No one may act against his convictions, as Saint Paul had already said (Rom 14:23). But the fact that the conviction a person has come to certainly binds in the moment of acting, does not signify a canonization of subjectivity. It is never wrong to follow the convictions one has arrived at—in fact, one must do so. But it can very well be

wrong to have come to such askew convictions in the first place, by having stifled the protest of the anamnesis of being. The guilt lies then in a different place, much deeper—not in the present act, not in the present judgment of conscience but in the neglect of my being which made me deaf to the internal promptings of truth. For this reason, criminals of conviction like Hitler and Stalin are guilty. These crass examples should not serve to put us at ease but should rouse us to take seriously the earnestness of the plea: "Free me from my unknown guilt" (Ps 19:13).

Epilogue: Conscience and Grace

At the end, there remains the question with which we began. Is not the truth, at least as the faith of the Church shows it to us, too lofty and difficult for man? Taking into consideration everything we have said, we can respond as follows. Certainly the high road to truth and goodness is not a comfortable one. It challenges man. Nevertheless, retreat into self, however comfortable, does not redeem. The self withers away and becomes lost. But in ascending the heights of the good, man discovers more and more the beauty which lies in the arduousness of truth which constitutes redemption for him. We would dissolve Christianity into moralism if no message which surpasses our own actions became discernible. Without many words an image from the Greek world can show this to us. In it we can observe simultaneously both how the anamnesis of the creator extends from within us outward toward the redeemer and how everyone may see him as redeemer, because he answers our own innermost expectations. I am speaking of the story of the expiation of the sin of matricide of Orestes. He had committed the murder as an act of conscience. This is designated

by the mythological language of obedience to the command of the god Apollo. But he now finds himself hounded by the furies or erinyes who are to be seen as mythological personifications of conscience which, from a deeper wellspring of recollection, reproach Orestes, declaring that his decision of conscience, his obedience to the "saying of the gods" was in reality guilt.

The whole tragedy of man comes to light in this dispute of the "gods," that is to say, in this conflict of conscience. In the holy court, the white stone of Athena leads to Orestes' acquittal, his sanctification in the power of which the erinyes are transformed into emends, spirits of reconciliation. Atonement has transformed the world. The myth, while representing the transition from a system of blood vengeance to the right order of community, signifies much more than just that. Hans Usr Von Balthasar expressed this "more" as follows: "...Calming grace always assists in the establishing of justice, not the old graceless justice of the Erinyes period, but that which is full of grace..." This myth speaks to us of the human longing that conscience's objectively just indictment and the attendant destructive, interior distress it causes in man, not be the last word. It thus speaks of an authority of grace, a power of expiation which allows the guilt to vanish and makes truth at last truly redemptive. It is the longing for a truth which doesn't just make demands of us but also transforms us through expiation and pardon. Through these, as Aeschylus puts it, "guilt is washed away" and our being is transformed from within, beyond our own capability. This is the real innovation of Christianity.

The Logos, the truth in person, is also the atonement, the transforming forgiveness above and beyond our capability and incapability. Therein lies the real novelty upon which the larger

Christian memory is founded and which indeed, at the same time, constitutes the deeper answer to what the anamnesis of the creator expects of us. Where this center of the Christian anamnesis is not sufficiently expressed and appreciated, truth becomes a yoke which is too heavy for our shoulders and from which we must seek to free ourselves. But the freedom gained thereby is empty. It leads into the desolate land of nothingness and disintegrates of itself. Yet the yoke of truth in fact became "easy" (Mt 11:30) when the truth came, loved us, and consumed our guilt in the fire of his love. Only when we know and experience this from within, will we be free to hear the message of conscience with joy and without fear.