

NEWMAN AND CONSCIENCE

Blessed John Henry Newman is rightly known for the central place he gave to conscience in helping us come to know the existence of God, and what God requires of us. The importance he accorded to conscience is inextricably linked with his love of the truth. This love of the truth led him from the bible reading Protestantism of his childhood through Evangelicalism, Tractarianism and finally into the Roman Catholic Church which he referred to as the ‘one fold of the Redeemer.’ Later in life, writing as a Catholic he wrote that:

‘I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.’

Some people have taken the above quotation to mean that Newman believed that it is more important to follow one’s conscience than to follow any external guides, including the Pope. To put these two in opposition is to completely misunderstand the life and work of Newman in general, and his attitude towards conscience in particular.

The first thing we need to clarify is what we mean by the word conscience. Newman was very conscious that what many people in his day described as conscience was pure subjectivity. He complained when many people advocated rights of conscience what they really wanted was *‘the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting according to their judgement or their humour without any thought of God at all.’* If such a subjective understanding of

conscience was common in Newman's day, how much more common is it in our own day, even among Catholics?

What then did Newman mean by conscience if he didn't mean just following one's own feelings? He describes conscience as 'the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation.' This means that God speaks to the heart of all people, even those who have never come to know God or the Gospel of Christ. If God can speak to our hearts through our conscience, does that mean that we have no need of Revelation? Absolutely not. Newman tells us that conscience in the heart of the pagan acts as a '*stern monitor*' so that they become more conscious of what they ought to do, and more conscious that they are failing to do it. Here conscience '*...has nothing gentle, nothing of mercy in its tone. It is severe and even stern. It does not speak of forgiveness, but of punishment.*' It is for this reason that the Revelation of Christ comes as such a relief, opening up the way to forgiveness and friendship with God.

Even for Christians the sense of right and wrong while '*the highest of teachers*' is also '*the least luminous*' because it so subtle, and can be so easily be biased by pride, passion and other external factors so that ecclesiastical authority fulfils a vitally important role in the lives of the faithful. Is it not true that we are seldom good judges in our own cases? We tend to be either too strict or too lax with ourselves. We often need an outside guide to keep us from either extreme.

What should we do we do then if our conscience tells us something is right but the Church seems to say the opposite? Are we not supposed to follow our conscience no matter what? The short answer is that, yes, we must always

follow our conscience, if by conscience we mean the voice of God speaking in our hearts rather than our own whims and tastes. When Newman was asked about the possibility such a conflict between the teaching of the Pope and our conscience he counselled someone in such a situation to make sure it was their conscience speaking to them and not a '*mean, ungenerous spirit*' which seeks to avoid commands. Our default position as Catholics must always be to follow the teaching of the Church, and we can conscientiously do otherwise only when we are sure that to follow the teaching of the Church would be to commit a sin. Newman gives the somewhat flippant hypothetical example of the Pope ordering the holding of lotteries, and a particular priest refusing to hold such a lottery as he believed to do so would be to commit a sin. In this case the priest is subjectively correct to follow his conscience and disobey the Pope in refusing to run a lottery. On the other hand, he is objectively wrong because there is nothing in the teaching of the Church which forbids the holding of lotteries.

This brings us to the fact that our conscience might be sincere in opposing the teaching of the Church, while being in error or erroneous. While it is subjectively correct to follow an erroneous conscience it does not make those actions morally right. If the sincerity of one's conscience were all that mattered then the most evil men, committing the most evil of actions would be doing right if they were absolutely certain they were doing the right thing. It is for this reason that all Christians have a duty to inform as well as follow their consciences. How do we inform our conscience? We do this through the ordinary practice of our Catholic faith: Attending Holy Mass, listening to homilies and frequenting the sacraments especially the sacrament of penance where we can raise our moral queries with our confessors. We also have a duty, within reason, of educating ourselves by reading the scriptures, especially the gospels, orthodox Catholic theology and the official documents written by the

Pope, and the bishops. We have an invaluable tool in the Catechism of the Catholic Church which provides a short but accurate summary of the Church's teaching on any given matter.

In living out the Christian life we shouldn't be surprised if things are difficult and the way signposted by the Church is different from that of much contemporary thinking. Our Lord Himself warned us that following Him would mean walking the narrow way, and indeed carrying our cross daily. When we are challenged by the voice of our conscience or by the teaching of the Church we should accept the challenge with courage and generosity.
