

Third Annual St Thomas More Forum Lecture
Faith and Conscience: a Dilemma?
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Introduction

As we attempt to address the question of a possible dilemma between our faith and our conscience, it seems to me that there are two important initial steps we must take. The first is to seek some clarity about the context of the question. Faith and conscience are integral elements in our Christian understanding of morality. So we will begin with a brief outline of how we might understand Christian morality, drawing especially on the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, the Church's universal teacher. The second step will be to take a close look at what we mean by faith and by conscience. This should help us see more clearly what might be the source of a possible dilemma between them.

The Moral Life as Context

Of primary concern for an understanding of the moral life is its goal, eternal happiness in a union of mind and will with God. Faith is essentially what we call the beginning of this union offered by God to every living person capable of receiving it in this life: "The assurance [or reality] of things hoped for, the conviction [or evidence] of things not seen."(1). After accepting this gift the moral life is about the intensification of our union with God under the influence of the Holy Spirit. This comes about in the first place through the activity of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which put us in touch, as it were, with God. Then we have also the cardinal virtues of justice, courage, temperance and prudence which bring reasonableness to our everyday lives and activities. And finally we are given what we call gifts of the Holy Spirit which enable us, by divine guidance, to overcome the weakness of our reason in making the whole of our lives an expression of faith, hope and love of God, which bring us into eternal life.

Such is the classical understanding of the moral life as articulated especially by Thomas Aquinas. It can be seen, therefore, as a life in "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2), under the Spirit's inspiration, guidance and leadership. God became one of us in Christ in order to bring us as man this gift of the Spirit by incorporating us into his own Mystical Body, making us members of the Body of Christ, as St. Paul expresses it.

One further portrayal which holds a prominent place in St. Thomas's understanding of the moral life is the human person as God's created image. This takes us back to the story in *Genesis* of the creation of Adam, but it also prompts us to enquire further into the dignity of the human person. Under the inspiration of this image the moral life can fruitfully be seen as a process of growth in likeness to God. And here we are brought back to the guidance of the Holy Spirit given by Christ to the members of His Body on earth. According to St Thomas, the decisive element which makes us images of God and specifically human is our autonomy in free will. This freedom of ours brings us up against one of the great mysteries of the human person. As the French Dominican theologian, Fr Chenu, puts it: "Observe the extraordinary liberality of a magnanimous God who achieves the omnipotence of divine 'government' of the universe all the more splendidly by conferring genuine autonomous efficacy upon human creatures." (3) This is surely what human dignity is basically about: God is operative within, and at the source of, our human freedom. "In the theologian's understanding, to be human – that is to say, intelligent, endowed with free will, master of oneself and one's acts – is to be the image of God. To become human, act human, or (if you prefer) to flow back toward God following the human mode and the characteristic resources available to humans through the creative flux – all this is literally to exercise one's role as image of God. By the same stroke, to the astonishment of the simple moralist, one thus treats God not as legislator, remunerator, or helper, or whatever else you want to call him, but as model." (4)

While we might agree that God is not to be considered primarily as legislator, it is nevertheless clearly important that we understand the function of law in our moral life. The Church's history shows us that there have been two major trends. On the one hand, law has been seen as "an order proceeding from the will of a competent party which is able to impose obligation", a definition proposed in the 17th century by the eminent and very influential Jesuit moral theologian, Francisco Suarez. (5) Such an understanding of law fits well into a mentality which sees obedience to the will of the legislator as the supreme norm for right action. When this train of thought passes into our thinking about God's laws it transforms our entire conception of God and leaves us with a vision of the moral life as primarily a matter of obedience to written laws.

On the other hand, many have seen as more satisfactory St. Thomas's older definition of law as "an act of the reason which establishes order for the benefit of the community." (6) It is clear that this understanding arises out of a very different mentality. For St. Thomas law appeals in the first place to the reason. If it is not reasonable it is unjust and therefore has no binding force. Moreover, law is for the benefit of the community. If its observance is not beneficial in a particular situation, it does not apply. What we have here is a conception of law which takes into account and respects the rational nature of the people for whom it is made and also the variability of human situations. All true law will be a reflection of the eternal law of God according to which the universe is governed.

The defining and most illuminating moment in all of St. Thomas's treatment of law comes when he considers the New Law of the Gospel. This he defines as before all else the very grace of the Holy Spirit, and, quoting St. Augustine, the very presence of the Holy Spirit within us. (7) In other words the law we live by as Christians is the Holy Spirit who instructs us and moves from within our own freedom according to the mind and will of God. In this sense we are not "under the law" (8) because the movement and prompting of the Spirit is our own prompting, because love inclines us to precisely what the law commands (9). St Thomas acknowledges the need for the written laws of the Gospel, but insists that these are secondary. Their function is to dispose us for the grace of the Holy Spirit or to instruct us in how to live according to its prompting (10). "Just as the law teaches virtuous acts from outside, so the Spirit moves us to them from inside." (11)

Faith and our Understanding of the Mystery of God

I have chosen to use the terms "Faith and Conscience" for this presentation rather than what is perhaps the more common expression "Church and Conscience". The reason is that any possible dilemma between Church and conscience will only arise because of our faith in the Church. On this point it is relevant to note that, in reference to the article of the creed which expresses belief in the Church, St. Thomas explains that "the phrase *in the holy catholic Church* should be understood in the sense that our faith is in the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the Church." (12)

The guidance we can expect to receive from the Church in moral matters depends, therefore, on our faith in God and also on the Church's understanding of the mystery of faith revealed to her. The emphasis here is on *mystery*. The Church's moral theology is "faith seeking expression in behaviour, or, as the Second Vatican Council expressed it, faith put into effect in morals. Theology...is both an attempt to make sense of human experience in the light of belief and an attempt to make sense of belief in the light of human experience...Ultimately it is an attempt to make human sense of divine reality and activity. It is therefore always and inevitably imperfect, a peering through a dark glass of limited human intelligence and limited language...Such a bid to recover the mystery for moral theology...reminds [us] that in such matters, as the Second Vatican Council observed, man is ultimately 'alone with God' in the 'sanctuary' of his conscience." (13) This applies to every Christian including those with authority to offer guidance to others. We are all immediately reliant on the same Holy Spirit.

In the understanding and exercise of its teaching office today, it is probably true to say that the Western Church relies heavily on the Gospel of Matthew, which is the one most concerned about the organisational structure of the Church. (14) In the final verses of that Gospel Jesus tells his apostles that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and that they are to make disciples of all nations and to teach them all the commands that they have been given, and finally that Jesus will be with them until the end of time. (15) From this saying of Jesus and its context in Matthew's Gospel we may readily derive the foundation for an emphatic and authoritative teaching office in the Church. But it is important to remember that Matthew does not provide the only account of moral teaching in the Church. Reference has already been made to St. Thomas's understanding St. Paul's teaching in this regard. In St. John's first Letter we find an even sharper contrast when he tells his community, "You have not lost the anointing he gave you, and you do not need anyone to teach you; the anointing he gave teaches you everything; you are anointed with truth, not with a lie, and as it has taught you, so you must stay in him" (16).

Conscience

One of the basic problems that arise when people talk about conscience is that they mean different things. It is apparent that for many people their conscience is an inner voice which arises spontaneously in the face of any decision to be made or judgment to be given on a past action of their own or someone else. It is somewhat like an inbuilt set of principles or guidelines that can be consulted at any time and will assuredly come up with the right answer. It is indisputable because it is heard as the true and adequate expression of what must be done, or should have been done, in the light of who I am as a person. It puts an end to argument. This notion is the reason why we have such respect for conscientious objectors. They are holding fast to their integrity as they see it.

It is unfortunate that in his play "A Man for All Seasons" Robert Bolt seems to portray Thomas More as sharing this understanding of conscience. At one point in the play More says to the Duke of Norfolk, "What matters is not that it's true, but that I believe it; or no, not that I **believe** it, but that I believe it." Here it appears that the ultimate criterion for human action is correspondence with my own inner self. It is indeed unlikely that Thomas More would have shared this more modern idea of conscience. (17). Nowadays we tend to think that a person has a natural right to follow their conscience according to this understanding. But are we right in so thinking?

There is an older conception of conscience which is quite different. Thomas Aquinas describes it as part of the acting out of the virtue of prudence. Here again we come up against a word that has changed its meaning in the common estimation. We tend today to associate prudence above all with caution. But this owes nothing to the classical understanding of that virtue. Prudence for Aquinas, and for Aristotle before him, is the virtue which assures reasonableness in how we go about pursuing the goals we set for ourselves. We might think it proper to pity people who are manifestly unreasonable, but we could also blame them if they have not taken appropriate measures to assure the reasonableness of their actions.

It might be apparent already that conscience or prudence is not infallible. It all depends on the resources available to us and made use of as we consider the right course of action. We might even be blameworthy for the principles we hold to inform our conscience. To believe that torture is justifiable and to carry it out with a good 'conscience' may well be morally more culpable than to perform it under duress.

For the Christian it needs to be borne in mind that conscience is not only the work of human reason. Our faculties and divine and human virtues do not operate in isolation from one another. As we work towards the best way of achieving an intermediate goal in our lives, which is what conscience is about, our practical intelligence has more to rely on than its own natural ability. Even at this level whatever acquired virtues of justice, prudence and temperance we have achieved will tend to move our reason towards whatever is right in a particular situation. Reason alone, however, is never an adequate guide for us. Our ultimate goal is the vision of God. So all our human activity needs to be

geared to this end. That is why we cannot manage without the guidance of the Holy Spirit given to us through virtues which are infused and the gifts of the Spirit which make us sensitive to divine guidance. Also to be kept in mind when considering conscience is the influence that such factors as personal maturity, memory, experience, inventiveness and physical and emotional health will have on our conscientious decision making. Finally, we Christians, as members of Christ's mystical Body, will naturally draw on the wisdom of others in the more important decisions of our lives. It is here that the influence of the teaching authority of the Church and of law in general will come into play. We will look at that in greater detail in due course.

Thomas Aquinas makes an important and illuminating distinction. He says that it is always wrong to go against your conscience. Here it is important to remember that by conscience he means that we have made use of all available means, natural and supernatural, to come to a decision about the right thing to do in pursuit of our goal. He even goes so far as to say that if we are convinced that the Church is basically false, we would be wrong not to leave the Church. However, in answer to the question whether it is always good to follow your conscience, he answers, "No". The reason is that our conscience may not have been adequately formed. That is to say, we may not have taken due care in assuring that a particular course of action is indeed reasonable in the current situation. It is clear that in Thomas's view the conscience is not an infallible guide to right conduct, nor is a clear conscience a sure sign of virtue. It is here that he departs from the modern view of conscience. He thinks that we should have a constant awareness that a decision we make may be wrong. The certainty of a conscientious decision in a particular situation is always limited. A clear conscience presupposes not only that we have taken all the necessary steps in coming to our decision, but also that what we aim to achieve by our action is good in itself.

At this point it is important to have an overall grasp of the idea of prudence, and therefore of conscience, which can be gathered from all the details we have seen so far. As Fr Chenu puts it, prudence is about "Practical truth which cannot be determined by general principles of science or wisdom, because it is truth immersed in the unique singularity of real actions and situations...Prudence interiorizes and personalizes the law to the point that I am able to speak decisively about obligation only from inside my conscience...Once God is revealed to me and invites me to communion in his life, then prudence, internally transformed by infused grace and enabled to guide me toward eternal life, receives its governing force from God. Consequently the vision of faith and the conduct of moral acts converge into a practical synthesis" (18).

How a Dilemma might arise between Faith and Conscience

It is time now to pass from the general to the particular. It may well seem from our reflections so far that the possibility of such a dilemma has been ruled out. Our conscience is governed by reason which in turn is enlightened by faith and its accompanying virtues and gifts. St Paul tells us that the Christian life is living in the fellowship and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we have seen. So how can a dilemma arise between faith and conscience? I would like to attempt an answer to this question by suggesting that when we appear to experience such a dilemma it is likely that we have not considered one of the following factors.

First and perhaps most obvious is the possibility that our conscience is inadequately formed and therefore incapable of reaching a sound judgment about the appropriate course of action in a particular situation. If this inadequacy is blameworthy on our part, which is possible for any one of a multitude of reasons, the solution could be the reform of our moral life or the seeking of guidance from those who are better instructed.

Secondly, we need to consider the situation where the inadequacy of our moral formation is not blameworthy, but a seeming dilemma arises when we discover that some course of action we had thought to be right was contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures or the Church. (We will consider the situation later of the case where there is nothing significantly lacking in our moral formation, but a seeming clash still arises between our own thinking and that of Church authorities.) In this present case we are dealing with the delicate and mysterious manner in which the Spirit guides and lives in fellowship with those who are misguided in moral matters. The opportunity may not be present for extended moral re-education. We might suppose that the seeming clash with the dictates of faith may occur more frequently not to the person involved but to others. Priests who hear confessions in communities where the people are largely uninstructed in the faith may well be familiar with this situation. Fr Mahoney SJ describes it well as a “command-possibility tension” (19) The question is whether the strict requirements of the written law are reasonably capable of fulfilment by the person concerned. As we probe this matter a little further it may help to bear in mind Jesus’ command to all of us that we should love God with our whole mind and heart and our neighbour as ourself.

Many of us Catholics are familiar with the principle that God does not command the impossible. Therefore, if some action is commanded it is possible for us. But, more often these days, theologians are asking whether if some action is impossible, it can be commanded by God. It might seem we are more sensitive these days, as Fr Mahoney puts it, “to the complexities and perplexities of various moral situations, and a desire to render moral theology more responsive to the real struggles and experience, and even helplessness, of Christians than has hitherto been the case.” (20) We have been created with interior freedom but its exercise is limited by situations. The objection may be raised that grace is always available to those who ask, but here St. Thomas’s conviction must be remembered that grace builds on nature. Where natural capacities are lacking, or the social structures of society, which should be channels of grace, are corrupt, then grace is impeded, unless, that is, we wish to speak of miracles which are, by definition, exceptional. “In the final analysis it is only the individual, and God, who can be aware of what resources, both personal and social, are available to [us] in the inner sanctuary which no other human being can enter and where [we are] alone with God” (21).

While I intended the above point to refer primarily to those with an irremediably inadequate grasp of moral matters, I think it is clear that much of it could apply to any of us. Now, in the third place, I want to address explicitly the situation of those who have no significant gaps in their moral formation but may nevertheless feel at times that they are faced by a moral dilemma of the kind we are considering. To set the scene I want to quote a significant passage from the Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: “The Church safeguards the deposit of God’s Word, from which religious and moral principles are drawn. But it does not always have a ready answer to individual questions, and it wishes to combine the light of revelation with the experience of everyone in order to illuminate the road on which humanity has recently set out.” (22) In some instances we will have noticed a variety of teachings on certain moral issues by Church authorities, for example, the morality of the use of condoms. Moreover, it needs to be borne in mind that “the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching over the centuries and in recent decades has changed markedly in many respects – as in the field of biblical studies; in the possibility of salvation for unbelievers outside the Catholic Church; in ecumenism; in the matter and form of the sacrament of Orders; in recognizing the moral possibility in marriage of birth-control through periodic abstinence from intercourse.” (23)

It is not my intention here to undermine the obligation we undoubtedly have to respect the teaching and laws of those in authority in the Church. I am pointing out the practical importance of what St. Thomas had to say about the difficulty of making laws that are intended to cover all the circumstances possible in human living. “The more you descend into the detail,” he says, “the more it appears how the general rule admits of exception, so you have to hedge it with cautions and qualifications. The greater the number of conditions accumulated the greater the number of ways in which the principle is seen to fall short.” (24) This understanding of law is a far cry from that mentioned above, which sees law as an authoritative command issuing from the will of the legislator, and the only response called for is obedience to the legislator’s will. St Thomas quotes St Augustine’s dictum that “There never seems to have been a law that was not just” (25), meaning that if justice is not served there is no law.

This teaching of St. Thomas is treated extensively when he comes to consider the virtue of *epieikeia*. He says that, “Because human acts about which laws are made exist as particular happenings, infinitely variable, there is no possibility of laying down a rule of law that would cover every case. Legislators rather take into account what is ordinarily the case and formulate a law accordingly. Yet observing this law in some situations runs counter to the rightness of justice and the public good intended by all law... Thus in these and similar cases to follow the word of law would be an evil; a good to follow what the meaning of justice and the public good demand, letting the letter of the law be set aside. *Epieikeia* – we call it equity – is addressed to this end and so clearly is a virtue.” (26)

Conclusion

I want to conclude this presentation with two quotations from the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution, *The Church in the Modern World*. They will be familiar to many of us. I would like to think that our reflections so far are nothing more than a commentary on those two passages. The context of these quotations is given in the footnotes.

We have in our hearts a law inscribed by God. Our dignity lies in observing this law, and by it we will be judged. Our conscience is our most secret core, and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of our neighbour... That which is truly freedom is an exceptional sign the image of God in human persons. For God willed that we should ‘be left in the hand of our own counsel’ so that we might of our own accord seek the creator and freely attain full and blessed perfection by cleaving to the creator.

Human living is about growth and so, therefore, is our moral life. Basically, it is a searching for God. We hope to get better at it. Along the way we have to live with a certain degree of uncertainty about many of our conscientious decisions. This is due to both our imperfect grasp of the mystery towards which we are tending and the variability of the human situations in which we are called to make decisions. In the face of this, one option is to want a multiplicity of laws which cover every conceivable situation we might have to face, and which will only require of us a submissive will. But for St. Thomas, at any rate, this would leave us with empty heads and make us untrue to our nature as images of God.

1. Hebrews 11:1.
2. Cor. 13:13.
3. M.D. Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, Liturgical Press, 2002. P. 54.
4. Jean Tonneau, *Morale et Theologie*, in *Initiation theologique*, vol. 3, 13-36; cited by Chenu, op. cit. p.98.
5. Francisco Suarez. Cf. John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, Clarendon Press, 1987. P. 226.
6. John Maloney, op. cit. P. 240 where he cites St Thomas.
7. Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae, I-II, 106,1*.
8. Gal. 5:18.
9. Cf. John Mahoney, *Seeking the Spirit*, Sheed and Ward, 1981. P. 70.
10. Cf. St. Thomas, loc.cit.
11. Cf. Mahoney, loc.cit. P.71 where he quotes Aquinas's commentary on Galatians.
12. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, II-II, 1, 9 ad 5*.
13. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, pp.340-1.
14. Cf. Mahoney, op.cit. pp. 173-4.
15. Cf. Gospel of Matthew, 28:18-20, from the Jerusalem Bible.
16. I John 2:27.
17. Cf. Herbert McCabe OP, *God Still Matters*, Continuum, 2002, p.154. I am indebted to Fr McCabe for his description of conscience in this book.
18. Chenu, op.cit., pp. 109-111.
19. Mahoney, *Seeking the Spirit*, p.32.
20. Mahoney, op. cit., p. 35. In this section I am closely following Fr Mahoney's outline.
21. Mahoney, op. cit., p. 39.
22. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, p. 303, where the quotation is taken from.
23. Mahoney, op. cit., p. 325-6.
24. St. Thomas, op. cit., *I-II, 94,4*.
25. St. Thomas, op. cit., *I-II, 95,2*.
26. St. Thomas, *II-II, 120, 1*.
27. Austin Flannery, Editor, *Documents of Vatican Council II*, Liturgical Press, 1975, pp.916-7. I have changed the text in order to render it in inclusive language.

*“Deep within our conscience we discover a law which we have not laid upon ourselves but which we must obey. Its voice, ever calling us to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells us inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. **For we have in our hearts a law inscribed by God. Our dignity lies in observing this law, and by it we will be judged. Our conscience is our most secret core, and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of our neighbour.** Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other people in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by the objective standards of moral conduct. Yet it often happens that conscience goes astray through ignorance which it is unable to avoid, without thereby losing its dignity. This cannot be said of those who take little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.*

*It is, however, only in freedom that we can turn ourselves towards what is good. The people of our time prize freedom very highly and strive eagerly for it. In this they are right. Yet they often cherish it improperly, as if it gave them leave to do anything they like, even when it is evil. But that which is truly freedom is an exceptional sign the image of God in human persons. **For God willed that we should 'be left in the hand of our own counsel' so that we might of our own accord seek the creator and freely attain full and blessed perfection by cleaving to the creator.** Our dignity therefore requires us to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a person way from within, and not by blind impulses in ourselves or by mere external constraint. We gain much dignity when, ridding ourselves of all slavery to the passions, we press forward towards our goal by freely choosing what is good, and, by our diligence and skill, effectively secure for ourselves the means suited to this end. Since human freedom has been weakened by sin it is only by the help of God's grace that we can give our actions their full and proper relationship to God. Before the judgment seat of God an account of our own life will be rendered to each of us according as we have done either good or evil."*