

Moral Conscience  
By Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes

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In an age of theological sound bites, the teaching of Cardinal John Henry Newman on conscience is usually reduced to his words, uttered after the declaration on papal infallibility: "I toast the pope; but I toast conscience first." Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, has helped to uncover the true meaning of Newman's teaching in a recent article, "The Inconvenient Conscience," in *First Things*.

What is conscience? There are two functions in the human intellect. The first is an intuitive attraction to the truth. The second involves a judgment about truth. Conscience is the inner witness of moral truth. It also involves a practical judgment applying moral truths to concrete human dilemmas. In his letter to the Duke of Norfolk, Cardinal Newman testified: "Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and grace, speaks to us behind a veil, teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal vicar of Christ."

Notice that conscience presumed objective moral truth. This is often disputed today. Many have lost confidence that the human mind can reach true objectivity. But we cannot ground a free human society except on objective moral truth. Is racism wrong? Is the exploitation of the poor wrong? Is the killing of an innocent human being wrong? There have to be objective moral truths to which we conform or a free society dissolves into chaos.

This was the conviction of the founders of our country. In the Declaration of Independency they expressed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." When President George Washington was leaving office, he cautioned the citizens to the United States that the American experiment would fail if we did not recognize the role of religion in nurturing those virtues which enable us to embrace common moral truths.

Tolerance is often misinterpreted today. True tolerance leads us to have respect for each person, no matter what he or she may think. But, tolerance does not require us to accept the *thinking* of others. Academic and political freedoms are to provide an atmosphere wherein the genuine exchange of ideas can lead to an acknowledgment of objective truth.

The recent stem cell and cloning debates bring this home. What is the truth about "somatic nuclear cell transfer"? Is it the creation of human life or not? Some scientists refer to it as a nuclear transfer unit. A unit? It is human life! If we recognize the truth, then it is important for us to ban all cloning of human beings, even for good purposes. We cannot kill one human life to save another except in self-defense!

This example brings home to us why the Church has always been concerned to foster a true formation of conscience. Christ has given to his Church the charge to ensure fidelity to revealed truth. The Church's role in conscience formation is not, as some suppose, akin to ideological brainwashing. It is an educational role. Education means to draw forth from within. The Church points to a truth that is written in human creation.

When we experience difficulty in understanding what the Church is teaching, we should not rush to disagreement, but rather to humble prayer, study and openness to conversion. So often the conflict we experience is rooted in a reluctance to give up something that is wrong. The conflict, then, is within us, not between us and the Church. Conscience can make erroneous judgments about moral behavior. As responsible adults, we have the obligation genuinely to seek the truth, guided by the Church's magisterial teaching.

The right formation of conscience has profound implications for the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, as well as the Eucharist. If, for instance, we begin to redefine what is sin, we become less inclined to seek this sacrament in our lives. Vagueness about what is right and wrong begins to diminish our personal consciousness of sin.

Similarly, we can claim an entitlement to receive holy Communion. The Church urges full participation in the Eucharist, but teaches that it is necessary for us to be in communion with the Church's faith and free from mortal sin in our lives to receive holy Communion worthily. St. Paul cautioned the early Corinthian community not to profane the Body and Blood of the Lord [1 Cor 11:27-30].

A good conscience, then, is a witness to moral truth and a guide to right judgment for our behavior. God grant us all the grace of a good conscience.