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Conscience Conference for Seminary Formators

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Hearing and Heeding Christ's Aboriginal Vicar: Newman and the Formation and Following of Christian Conscience

Introduction

- I. Our topic today is the Formation and Following of Christian Conscience, which is an imperative for the Church in every age but is a particularly urgent and timely topic and task in our age. John Paul II mentions in *Veritatis Splendor* 64 that the Church “puts herself always and only at the “service of conscience,” a diakonia that will continue until the end of time.
- II. Internal to the Church, we have two big events that we’re preparing for:
 - A. New Evangelization
 1. Jesus’ great commission to go and teach all nations, instructing them to carry out everything he commanded us, is certainly a commission to form consciences. With the help of the HS, we pass on as of first importance what we ourselves received not just as a body of truths or dictates but as a formation of the mind so that others may learn how to carry out everything Christ commands, not as external edicts but with full and free participation as mature moral agents. One of the most important aspects of the first evangelization and of the evangelization new in methods, ardor and expression that we’re called to carry out today is conscience formation. Evangelization involves not just teaching truths but training, forming others, to be conformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to Christ, who is the truth incarnate, so that they may live, and choose, in free loving communion with him.
 - B. Year of Faith
 1. We’re also preparing to inaugurate a Year of Faith, which is not geared merely to read the Second Vatican Council documents or the Catechism on their respective anniversaries, but to assimilate their teaching with truth. Faith, as Pope Benedict wrote in *Porta Fidei*, is an act “in which we choose to entrust ourselves fully to God, in complete freedom,” and through that trust in God to what he says and has done. To grow in faith we must grow in this capacity of entrusting ourselves to the truth God has revealed and to flee from the various counterfeits that are out there. The moral conscience is obviously crucial to this growth in faith.
 2. So the Year of Faith is an opportunity to buttress both the *fides quae* and the *fides qua*, each of which should strengthen the formation of conscience.
- III. Ad intra, however, we have to say that conscience formation is one of the biggest challenges we have.
 - A. We’re living in a culture in which there’s so much active deformation of conscience through Hollywood, popular music, some video games, not to mention the various “isms” we’re going to have a chance to talk about later. Just like parents aren’t the only teachers of their children, so Mother Church is not the only formator of the consciences of the faithful and there is much dandelion being sown among the seeds that the Mystical Body of Christ is trying to implant. We can see this not only on controversial issues — abortion, marriage, contraception, IVF, death penalty, immigration and more — but also on issues that aren’t controversial but are equally concerning, the precept of Sunday Mass attendance, the need to confess one’s sins, the need to vote in accordance with a properly formed conscience and so much more. Many precisely cite their conscience as a reason why they are not keeping commandments, precepts, and the natural law.
 - B. In the olden days, if people missed Mass, were shacking up out of wedlock, were putting material goods above spiritual goods, not welcoming strangers, outright disobeying Church moral teachings, if they were divorcing-and-remarrying or marrying outside the Church, they would basically realize that they were doing so against their conscience, would feel the natural pain of conscience called guilt, and would be hoping for some solution. Now few seem to realize that there is a discordance. Many will say that in their conscience not only do they feel exempt from Church teaching, but rather, in conscience, they’ve come to realize that Church teaching is in fact wrong. This points to how much work needs to be done.
- IV. We also have the ad extra concerns.

- A. We've been battling now for over a generation to try to help and remedy the scandal of those who are schizophrenic in conscience, privately believing something to be intrinsically evil but publicly not only tolerating it but actively promoting it.
- B. Now we're dealing with attempts on the part of various governments, federal, state and local, not to mention various pharmaceutical companies, medical establishments and more to compel people to act against their conscience. I anticipate George Weigel will have much to say specifically about what's happening with the multivalent attack of the Obama administration against religious freedom and freedom of conscience, but what I'd like to mention here, relevant for our discussion on the formation of consciences, is what is at the root of the trampling of freedom of religion and of conscience.
- C. In a January meeting with US Bishops, Pope Benedict said:
1. One of the most memorable aspects of my Pastoral Visit to the United States was the opportunity it afforded me to reflect on America's historical experience of religious freedom, and specifically the relationship between religion and culture. ... Today that consensus [about the importance of religious freedom in the United States] has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents that are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such...
 2. He was pointing to what he labeled "an extreme individualism, seek[ing] to promote notions of freedom detached from moral truth. ... a **radical secularism** that finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres.
 3. Radical secularism, an extreme individualism that promotes freedom apart from moral truth, is at the root of these attacks on freedom of conscience. Secularism, as Pope Benedict has defined it, is living *si Deus non daretur*, "as if God were not a given." Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said a couple of years ago that regardless of President Obama's attestation that he's a Christian, he's the first truly secularist president we've ever had, someone who takes all his main categories from secularist philosophies rather than from faith or values consistent with Judeo-Christian faith.
 4. For militant secularists, however, it's not enough for them to live as if God does not exist, but they want to force their practical atheism on everyone else, at least in public. They may concede the right to "freedom of worship," meaning the liberty to spend one's free time going to the Church, synagogue or mosque, but they want to restrict — as President Obama's administration is doing, both home and internationally — the right to "religious freedom," meaning the liberty to live one's faith publicly.
 5. Radical secularism goes hand-in-hand with a denial of any prerogatives of conscience: if everyone needs to live as if God doesn't exist, then no one can claim to be hearing and following God's voice in the inner sanctuary of conscience. That's why for secularists no one can be granted exceptions to being forced to comply with the secularist push for the concocted rights to abortion-on-demand and husbandless or wifeless marriages.
 6. So, in addition to a proper formation of conscience, we have to defend its existence, its rights and responsibilities.
- V. The types of issues that are being faced today are not new. They flow quite a bit from the subjectivist turn in philosophy, both in terms of what we can know and what the sources of morality are (like external authorities).
- VI. I put Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman in the title of this talk because I think in the 19th century he confronted many of the same issues we're facing today and I think his famous work on conscience provides us many of the tools we need today to respond to contemporary challenges.
- A. Newman believed that the existence of the conscience was one of the most compelling modern proofs for the existence of God.
1. Cardinal Dulles: Newman thought that the greatest proof for the existence of God was the reality of conscience. All proofs for God's existence from causality and the order of the universe, he believed, yield a notional assent, an abstract affirmation that goes out not so much to the reality known as to the deliverances of our mind. Conscience on the contrary confronts us directly with God as a reality to whom we are subject and upon whom we depend. God's voice resounds in the testimony of conscience. All normal persons have a conscience, he believed, that commands them categorically to do what is right and avoid what is evil. Conscience refers us to a sanction higher than the self and implies

the existence of One to whom we are responsible, and before whom we stand guilty and ashamed when we have acted against its bidding. Conscience therefore impresses on the imagination the idea of a sovereign lawgiver and judge, a supreme authority whom we must obey and to whom we must render an account of our behavior. It discloses God as a personal being, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-just.

- B. He described this, and talked about what conscience is, in his fictional work *Callista*, in which he had *Callista* say in dialogue:
1. "I feel that God is within my heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, 'Do this, don't do that.' You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature, as it is to joy or to grieve. I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me. Nothing shall persuade me that it does not ultimately proceed from a person external to me. It carries with it its proof of its divine origin. My nature feels toward it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness — just like that which I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend.... The echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and I fear."
- C. That's what he believed conscience is. In his famous Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, he described what conscience is not. The context was the publication by a friend of his, William Gladstone, of an attack on the first Vatican Council. Gladstone criticized Vatican I because he said Catholic convictions would force people to lose their intellectual and moral freedom and their conscience in favor of submitting to the Pope's authority and they would abandon civil responsibilities in favor of allegiance to a foreign power. So Newman, at the behest of many, published in 1875 his letter to the Duke of Norfolk. Many of the arguments that Gladstone made will sound very familiar to us 137 years later.
- D. In 1991, Cardinal Ratzinger said that Newman's "life and work could be designated a single great commentary on the question of conscience." His conversion was a following of conscience, a following of the truth, saying shortly before he crossed the Tiber, "No one could have a more unfavorable view than I of the present state of the Roman Catholics." So these were not abstract thoughts for him but true guiding principles.
1. "Catholics consider [conscience] to be the internal witness of both the existence and the law of God. ... Though it may be called, and is, a law of the mind, they would not grant that it was nothing more; I mean, that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise, with a vividness which discriminated it from all other constituents of our nature;"
 - a. There's a vivid sense of command, of duty, of reward.
 2. "Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway."
 - a. This famous expression "aboriginal vicar of Christ" means that conscience is the vicarious voice of God that human beings can perceive even before they become aware of the definitive revelation that Christ came from heaven to earth to give us. St. Paul was talking about this in his letter to the Romans, when he writes, "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 and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rom 2:14-16).
 - b. Because it is the vicar of Christ, it has a power. Newman phrases it in terms of the three-fold munera:
 - i. A prophet in the information it gives
 - ii. A priest in its interior blessings for following it and curses for disobeying it
 - iii. A king/shepherd/monarch in its having the final say

- c. In terms of our conscience, we're not called to remain aboriginal; our conscience is meant to be educated just like savages are hopefully eventually civilized; but even before that practice of education, we know certain things are wrong, like intentionally hurting or torturing other people.
3. "Let us see what is the notion of conscience in this day in the popular mind. There, no more than in the intellectual world, does "conscience" retain the old, true, Catholic meaning of the word. There too the idea, the presence of a **Moral Governor** is far away from the use of it, frequent and emphatic as that use of it is.
4. When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one's leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he like it, in his own way.
 - a. Conscience was being misused and abused then as if it were a supreme tribunal. In a world in which people were not believing in moral absolutes, their consciences became absolutes.
 - b. Ratzinger wryly remarked in 1984 in a conference to American bishops: "It is strange that some theologians have difficulty accepting the precise and limited doctrine of papal infallibility, but see no problem in granting de facto infallibility to everyone who has a conscience."
5. Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will.
 - a. Conscience has a duty to God. The respect given to conscience is a respect given to God.
 - b. But the counterfeit still exists of self-will, of "my will be done," rather than that of "thy will be done."
6. Then Newman specifically takes on the supposed conflict between conscience and the authority of the Church: "I have to say again, lest I should be misunderstood, that when I speak of Conscience, I mean conscience truly so called. When it has the right of opposing the supreme, though not infallible Authority of the Pope, it must be something more than that miserable counterfeit which, as I have said above, now goes by the name."
7. He wasn't arguing that there could never be a conflict with a clear teaching of the Church, but that such conflicts ought to be incredibly rare and under the strictest circumstances. It can't flow from just an anti-authoritarianism that believes no one, even the successor of St. Peter, the true Vicar of Christ, can instruct the aboriginal vicar about right and wrong.
8. "If in a particular case it is to be taken as a sacred and sovereign monitor, its dictate, in order to prevail against the voice of the Pope, must follow upon serious thought, prayer, and all available means of arriving at a right judgment on the matter in question. And further, obedience to the Pope is what is called "in possession;" that is, the *onus probandi* of establishing a case against him lies, as in all cases of exception, on the side of conscience. Unless a man is able to say to himself, as in the Presence of God, that he must not, and dare not, act upon the Papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin in disobeying it. *Primâ facie* it is his bounden duty, even from a sentiment of loyalty, to believe the Pope right and to act accordingly. He must vanquish that mean, ungenerous, selfish, vulgar spirit of his nature, which, at the very first rumor of a command, places itself in opposition to the Superior who gives it, asks itself whether he is not exceeding his right, and rejoices, in a moral and practical matter to commence with skepticism. He must have no willful determination to exercise a right of thinking, saying, doing just what he pleases, the question of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, the duty if

possible of obedience, the love of speaking as his Head speaks, and of standing in all cases on his Head's side, being simply discarded.

9. If this necessary rule were observed, collisions between the Pope's authority and the authority of conscience would be very rare.
- E. We're now living in a time in which these collisions are very popular for people. Newman, through his apologetic writings, including this Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, had an enormous impact on exposing and righting some of the erroneous notions of his day. From him we learn a method and a content to help us do the same. As we begin to look at the elements involved in a proper formation of conscience, I'd like to break it down into three parts:
1. A brief description of what conscience is. We need to know where we're going. I presume that you already have at least a very solid general idea and I predict that Dr. Fastiggi will talk about it at length tomorrow, but it would be helpful to review these points of the magisterium. It would be somewhat presumptuous, after all, if we are trying to help others form their consciences by the magisterium if we, ourselves, don't explicitly base our ideas solidly in the teachings of the magisterium. So that's where we'll begin with what I anticipate will be a gloss on a review.
 2. Second, we'll examine several of the cultural issues that are the "thorns" in the soil in which we're going to be trying to implant the seeds of proper conscience formation.
 3. Finally, knowing what conscience is and what the cultural challenges are that lead to a counterfeit notion of conscience, we'll look at various practices by which we can help to form our own consciences and others' consciences more adequately.

What Conscience Is

I. Definition of Conscience

- A. There are several definitions of conscience, some more descriptive, some more precise and scholastic.
- B. The first is what is given to us by The Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*:
 1. GS 16: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law that he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems that arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience that by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.
 - a. So we see it's **a law written in his heart by God, his most secret core and inner sanctuary**, where God's voice echoes.
 - b. The formation of conscience is a search for truth and of great benefit for society.
 - c. There's also ignorance, vincible and invincible that need to be confronted.
- C. *Veritatis Splendor* talks about **conscience**, first, **as an interior dialogue**:
 1. VS 58. The importance of this interior "dialogue of man with himself" can never be adequately appreciated. But it is also a **"dialogue of man with God,"** the author of the law, the primordial image and final end of man. Saint Bonaventure teaches that "conscience is like **God's herald and messenger**; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force". ... Conscience is **"the witness of God himself,"** whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man's soul, calling him "fortiter et suaviter" to obedience. "Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this,

and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience: in being the place, the sacred place where God speaks to man" [104].

2. To be faithful to right conscience is to be faithful to God and to himself.
3. Conscience is an organ not an oracle.
 - a. Ratzinger 1984: "Conscience is an organ, not an oracle. It is an organ because it is something that for us is a given, which belongs to our essence, and not something that has been made outside of us. But because it is an organ, it requires growth, training and practice." We can make a comparison to speech. "We speak because we have learned to speak from our parents. We speak the language that they taught us, although we realize there are other languages, which we cannot speak or understand. The person who has never learned to speak is mute. And yet language is not an external conditioning that we have internalized, but rather something that is properly internal to us. It is formed from outside, but this formation responds to the given of our own nature, that we can express ourselves in language. ... Man is in himself a being who has an organ of internal knowledge about good and evil. But for it to become what it is, it needs the help of others. Conscience requires formation and education. It can become stunted, it can be stamped out, it can be falsified so that it can only speak in a stunted or distorted way. The silence of conscience can become a deadly sickness of an entire civilization."
 - b. CCC 1777: When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

D. But then Veritatis Splendor describes its precise nature as a moral judgment.

1. VS 59. The precise nature of conscience ... is a "**moral judgment about man and his actions**," a judgment either of acquittal or of condemnation, according as human acts are in conformity or not with the law of God written on the heart.

E. The Catechism gives us a fuller definition:

1. CCC 1778 Conscience is a **judgment of reason** whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.
2. CCC 1780: Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.
 - a. Cardinal Ratzinger suggests in a 1991 speech that synderesis should be replaced by anamnesis, because we have a memory of the good and the true ontologically. From his origin, man's being resonates with some things and clashes with others. This anamnesis is not a store of retrievable contents, but an innate capacity to recall what is in accord with what man's nature seeks. We don't have arguments to prove it's there, but it just is there. Ratzinger prefers this recalling.
3. VS 59. The judgment of conscience is a "practical judgment," a judgment that makes known what man must do or not do, or which assesses an act already performed by him. It is a judgment that applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil. This first principle of practical reason is part of the natural law; indeed it constitutes the very foundation of the natural law, inasmuch as it expresses that primordial insight about good and evil, that reflection of God's creative wisdom which, like an imperishable spark ("scintilla animae"), shines in the heart of every man. But whereas the natural law discloses the objective and universal demands of the moral good, conscience is the application of the law to a particular case; this application of the law thus becomes an inner dictate for the individual, a summons to do what is good in this particular situation. Conscience thus formulates "moral obligation" in the light of the natural law: it is the obligation to do what the individual, through the workings of his conscience, "knows" to be a good he is called to do "here and now." The universality of the law and its obligation are acknowledged, not suppressed, once reason has established the law's application in concrete present circumstances. The judgment of conscience states "in an ultimate way" whether a certain particular kind of behavior is in conformity with the law; it

formulates the proximate norm of the morality of a voluntary act, "applying the objective law to a particular case."

- F. The CCC describes how it can be either "right" or "erroneous," but that it must be obeyed if the judgment is certain.
- II. 1790 A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.
- III. 1791 This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin." In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.
- A. VS 63. Conscience, as the ultimate concrete judgment, compromises its dignity when it is "culpably erroneous," that is to say, "when man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin".[109] Jesus alludes to the danger of the conscience being deformed when he warns: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt 6:22-23).
- B. St. Bonaventure said that conscience is **the herald of God**. The herald would have a trumpet in the city squares and give his message. He would sound and announce the law of the sovereign. The herald speaks in the name of the king and speaks with the authority of the king. Conscience speaks in the name of God. But the herald has to be tuned in to the king. The conscience has to be formed to apply the principles of morality to particular acts. To summarize, conscience is the voice of God and has God's authority. It must always be obeyed, but we have to be concerned that our herald, our conscience, is tuned into the message of the king.
- IV. VS 62: Conscience, as the judgment of an act, is not exempt from the possibility of error. As the Council puts it, "not infrequently conscience can be mistaken as a result of invincible ignorance, although it does not on that account forfeit its dignity; but this cannot be said when a man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin."
- A. Conscience always obliges in the name of God. Even the case of invincible erroneous conscience does not give an exception: conscience in this case desires evil because it judges it to be a good and hopes to fulfill God's will.
- B. To obey conscience is the "very dignity of man." Our character depends not only on our listening to and following our conscience, but making sure that we have tuned in to the voice of God in a world in which there are many counterfeit voices.
1. CCC 1780 The dignity of the human person implies and requires uprightness of moral conscience.
 2. Popular wisdom often equates the value of man with his conscience: "that man has no conscience" or "he has a perverted conscience" are about the biggest insults that could be stated.
- C. Ratzinger: Abelard had postulated that murderers of Christ had acted morally because they thought they were acting in the best interest of their people. Their good intention and their conscience was sufficient for justification. St. Thomas said one must follow conscience, but conscience must follow the light of anamnesis as creatures. We must emphasize that an erroneous conscience is always a lack of light, of truth, of a good in our existence. A conscience must be educated. It must be illuminated. We live in the Church even with our erroneous consciences in order to arrive at more light, more truth, more goodness for humanity.
- V. Conscience makes us personally responsible.
- A. We are stewards.
1. 1781 Conscience enables one to assume responsibility for the acts performed. If man commits evil, the just judgment of conscience can remain within him as the witness to the universal truth of the good, at the same time as the evil of his particular choice. The verdict of the judgment of conscience remains a pledge of hope and mercy. In attesting to the fault committed, it calls to mind the forgiveness that must be asked, the good that must still be practiced, and the virtue that must be constantly cultivated with the grace of God.

Seven modern confusions and problems with regard to conscience

I. False understanding of freedom

- A. VS 32: Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to "exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values". This is the direction taken by doctrines that have lost the sense of the transcendent which are explicitly atheist. The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment that hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and "being at peace with oneself", so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment.
- B. This leads to problems with the Church's authority:
1. VS 64. It follows that the authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom "from" the truth but always and only freedom "in" the truth, but also because the Magisterium does not bring to the Christian conscience truths which are extraneous to it; rather it brings to light the truths which it ought already to possess, developing them from the starting point of the primordial act of faith. The Church puts herself always and only at the "service of conscience," helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit (cf. Eph 4:14), and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.

II. This is tied to moral relativism.

- A. VS 32: As is immediately evident, "the crisis of truth" is not unconnected with this development. Once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost, inevitably the notion of conscience also changes. Conscience is no longer considered in its primordial reality as an act of a person's intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now. Instead, there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly.
- B. Conscience in a relativistic worldview is 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.
- C. Haas: What saves one from complete moral relativism are a number of factors necessary for morality: conscience, the shared experience of the community of which one is a part, reality itself and finally what God has revealed of his will for us. Without these counterbalances to subjectivism, one faces the threat of a totalitarianism of the powerful arising from their own arbitrary decisions. This is precisely the theme Cardinal Ratzinger took up in his words on the "dictatorship of relativism."
- D. Ratzinger 2005: We must not remain children in faith, in the condition of minors. And what does it mean to be children in faith? St Paul answers: it means being "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4: 14). This description is very timely! How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves - flung from one extreme to another: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St. Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error (cf. Eph 4: 14) comes true. Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine," seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's

own ego and desires. We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An "adult" faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth. We must develop this adult faith; we must guide the flock of Christ to this faith. And it is this faith - only faith - that creates unity and is fulfilled in love.

- E. 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 of conscience for Newman is linked to the prior centrality of the concept of truth, and can only be understood from this vantage point.

III. Individualist ethic

- A. VS 32. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature. These different notions are at the origin of currents of thought that posit a radical opposition between moral law and conscience, and between nature and freedom.
- B. Ratzinger 1984: "Conscience is understood by many as a sort of deification of subjectivity, a rock of bronze on which even the magisterium is shattered. It is said that in light of the conscience, no other cases apply. Conscience appears finally as subjectivity raised to the ultimate standard."

IV. Problems with obeying rather than establishing the law

- A. VS 54: The way in which one conceives the relationship between freedom and law is thus intimately bound up with one's understanding of the moral conscience. Here the cultural tendencies ... in which freedom and law are set in opposition to each another and kept apart, and freedom is exalted almost to the point of idolatry--lead to a "'creative' understanding of moral conscience.
- B. VS 60. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good, whose attractiveness the human person perceives and whose commandments he accepts. "Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-a-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behavior."

V. Situational ethics loosen the binding aspect of conscience as "exceptions to the general rule"

- A. VS 55: According to the opinion of some theologians, the function of conscience had been reduced, at least at a certain period in the past, to a simple application of general moral norms to individual cases in the life of the person. But those norms, they continue, cannot be expected to foresee and to respect all the individual concrete acts of the person in all their uniqueness and particularity. While such norms might somehow be useful for a correct "assessment" of the situation, they cannot replace the individual personal decision on how to act in particular cases. The critique already mentioned of the traditional understanding of human nature and of its importance for the moral life has even led certain authors to state that these norms are not so much a binding objective criterion for judgments of conscience, but a "general perspective" which helps man tentatively to put order into his personal and social life. ... In their desire to emphasize the "creative" character of conscience, certain authors no longer call its actions "judgments" but "decisions": only by making these decisions "autonomously" would man be able to attain moral maturity.
- B. VS 61. Consequently "in the practical judgment of conscience," which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, "the link between freedom and truth is made manifest". Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of "judgment" which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary "decisions". The maturity and responsibility of these judgments--and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject--are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favor of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions.
- C. VS 56: by taking account of circumstances and the situation, [it] could legitimately be the basis of certain "exceptions to the general rule" and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is

qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept.

VI. Conscience as opinion, feelings or the superego

- A. Many just think conscience is their own opinion, or gut feeling, about the way things ought to be.
- B. Many will say today "I feel" rather than "I think."
- C. Conscience is not feelings of moral approval or disapproval, like the Freudian superego, the continuation of the moral valuations of parents in your actions of whether they'd approve or not. Understood in this sense, it will frequently condemn what is not wrong or approve what is not right. Psychological conscience cannot of itself provide a person with moral guidance.
- D. We don't feel the conscience; it is a judgment of reason, though sometimes concomitant subordinate emotions will play a secondary role.
- E. Msgr. Livio Melina¹: There is an emotional aspect which supports reason, but conscience itself is a rational act. The feelings associated are secondary, though they support conscience. The extent and depth of the feelings depend upon somatic constitution. The feelings do not belong to the essence of the conscience. When we follow our conscience, we follow the judgment of reason and not our emotions. We can do the right thing even though we feel no satisfaction or even sadness. The neurotic person may feel guilty even though the reason says that they haven't done anything wrong.
- F. Fr. Wojciech Giertych, OP²: People have to be taught to follow the judgment of conscience and not their feelings. The force causing the feeling of guilt is the superego, although Freud said it was a fusion of social and moral factors, as well as their education. We should define superego as uniquely the quasi-habit of the interior senses — memory and the utility judgment — which causes a certain misguiding in the emotions. It is a quasi-habit because it really doesn't completely involve the reason. Animals can have guilty feelings. Animals have emotions, and by playing on the emotions they can be trained; but this is not conscience. The conscience, when it guides, invites to the creation of value through love, whereas the superego orders an act to gain appraisal, or out of fear that love will be taken away. Conscience has an extroverted attitude, toward the value; the superego is introverted, the center of attention is how one feels. Conscience is sensitive to value and capable of risk; the superego is static and helpless in new situations. Conscience is based on values independently of the status of authority; superego is heteronomous, seeking its basis on law. Superego looks at individual cases; conscience, the general. The superego looks to the past it wants to redeem; conscience to the future. Conscience wants to heal the attitude for the future; superego wants to be punished and thereby merit. Superego experiences a speedy transfer to the deep feeling of guilt to the feeling of value by confessing before authority. Conscience produces a feeling of guilt regardless of whether the authority has noticed; superego is more dependent on the weight of authority (what would the superior say?). A sound moral education should grant the ability to discern the rational judgment of the conscience and not the feelings, justifying the feelings only when in accord with reason. Conscience's judgments should be recognized as in accord with the moral guidance expressed in the divine law, although all the implications of the moral law don't have to be known. If we undertake an effort, we should be able to perceive the good, although with some error and in a cloud.

VII. The less you know, the better. Ignorance is bliss.

- A. There was an article a couple of years ago in First Things Magazine about whether Hitler had a conscience.
- B. Ratzinger presented a similar argument from some colleagues: "The SS people 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,

¹ Class notes taken by me, 1999, Moral Theology, John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family

² Class Notes taken by me, 1996, Angelicum, Fundamental Moral Theology

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 the justifying power of the subjective conscience.”

Formation of Conscience

I. Education of conscience in general

- A. We're not born knowing right or wrong in all its detail, even though the voice of God is like an aboriginal vicar. Conscience is formed just like any other type of learning: through parents, teachers, personal experience, theoretical reflection.
- B. 1783 Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.
- C. 1784 The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart.

II. What happens when this formation isn't given?

- A. Ratzinger 1991: 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... on an already formed moral character that can either continue to deform or be further purified. On this level, the level of judgment, it can be said that even the erroneous conscience binds. ... No one may act against his convictions, as St. 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).
- B. Ratzinger 1984: “One cannot approve the maxim that everyone may always do what his conscience allows him to do: in that case, the person without a conscience would be permitted to do anything. In truth it is his fault that his conscience is so broken that he no longer sees what he as a man should see. In other words, included in the concept of conscience is an obligation ... to care for it, to form it and educate it. Conscience has a right to respect and obedience in the measure in which the person himself respects it and gives it the care that its dignity deserves. The right of conscience is the obligation of the formation of conscience.”

III. US Bishops' Formation of Consciences for Faithful Citizenship

- A. USCCB: This statement highlights the role of the Church in the formation of conscience, and the corresponding moral responsibility of each Catholic to hear, receive, and act upon the Church's teaching in the lifelong task of forming his or her own conscience.
- B. The Church equips her members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teaching of the Church. Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling” about what we should or should not do. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. Conscience always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith. As stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is

going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right" (no. 1778).

C. The formation of conscience includes several elements.

1. First, there is a desire to embrace goodness and truth. For Catholics this begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
2. It is also important to examine the facts and background information about various choices.
3. Finally, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God. Catholics must also understand that if they fail to form their consciences they can make erroneous judgments

IV. Jesus' words on the importance of the formation of conscience

- A. Jesus formed conscience by parables, illustrating principles. He also gave clear teaching. He'd propose questions. "Which of the men proved neighbor?" "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" "Why do you call me good?" He wanted to develop their capacity to listen to the voice of conscience, even though he knew the answers. He wanted to form their freedom.
- B. VS 64. The words of Jesus — The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt 6:22-23) — also represent a call to "form our conscience," to make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good. In the same vein, Saint Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to the mentality of this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our mind (cf. Rom 12:2). It is the "heart" converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of "true" judgments of conscience. Indeed, in order to "prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2), knowledge of God's law in general is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient: what is essential is a sort of "'connaturality' between man and the true good." Such a connaturality is rooted in and develops through the virtuous attitudes of the individual himself: prudence and the other cardinal virtues, and even before these the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. This is the meaning of Jesus' saying: "He who does what is true comes to the light" (Jn 3:21).

V. Importance of Catechesis on conscience

- A. RP 26: The pastors of the Church are also expected to provide catechesis on conscience and its formation. This too is a very relevant topic, in view of the fact that, in the upheavals to which our present culture is subjected, this interior sanctuary, man's innermost self, his conscience, is too often attacked, put to the test, confused and obscured. Valuable guidelines for a wise catechesis on conscience can be found both in the Doctors of the Church and in the theology of the Second Vatican Council, and especially in the documents on the Church in the modern world and on religious liberty. Along these same lines, Pope Paul VI often reminded us of the nature and role of conscience in our life. I myself, following his footsteps, miss no opportunity to throw light on this most lofty element of man's greatness and dignity, this "sort of moral sense which leads us to discern what is good and what is evil... like an inner eye, a visual capacity of the spirit, able to guide our steps along the path of good". And I have reiterated the need to form one's own conscience, lest it become "a force which is destructive of the true humanity of the person, rather than that holy place where God reveals to him his true good."

VI. Overcoming neoplatonism through formation

- A. It is not enough just to teach, we have to train.
- B. Knowing the truth isn't enough to do it. We need to practice it.
- C. The Church needs to get better in this formation, this nitty gritty training. Obviously the home is important. But movements are additional aids in helping people form their conscience.

VII. Forming one's conscience involves bringing the "subjective" into alignment with the "objective." These are some of the ways:

- A. Grasping the implications of the basic principles of morality
- B. Grasping the morally significant features of the situation
- C. Applying these norms to the situation to form reasonable judgments of conscience
- D. Recognition of the precedence of truth vis-à-vis the judgment of conscience
- E. The interiority of the call of morality

- F. The predisposition in a subject to virtuous attitudes
 - G. The docility, humility and openness to whomever might be our teacher on the road to morality
 - H. The preparation for an encounter with truth in communion with those who sincerely seek it
- VIII. Learning from how conscience is deformed
- A. CCC 1792 Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct.
 - B. We see here several indications for the proper formation:
 1. Good formation in early years
 2. Knowledge of Christ and his Gospel
 3. Learning from good example of others, Christ and the saints, friends
 4. Virtues to master one's passions
 5. Proper understanding of the autonomy of conscience
 6. Acceptance of the Church's teaching
 7. Continual conversion
 8. Charity
- IX. Interiority and silence
- A. 1779 It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection.
- X. Prayer
- A. If we're seeking to hear the Lord's voice, we need to try to listen to it in prayer.
 - B. Ps 19:12-13: "Who can discern his errors? Free me from my unknown faults!"
 - C. Specifically prayer to the Holy Spirit, his gifts (counsel, prudence, wisdom, reverence, fear of the Lord)
- XI. Learning and inhering to the Word of God
- A. 1785 In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path,[54] we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church
- XII. Examining one's Conscience
- A. We must review our decisions in the light of God and speak to him about decisions we're confronting.
 - B. The crisis of conscience comes from lack of an examination. Many of us are responding to our impulses. Others rationally look at decisions they face. But so many don't discuss it with God.
 - C. Paul VI 1973: In order to understand and live Christianity, ... one has to have a limpid vision of one's own conscience. Spontaneously here we can think about the pedagogical, philosophical and ascetical recommendation to "know yourself," of the usefulness of the examination of conscience, of the search for interior honesty, of moral and spiritual sensitivity, we should say of the cleanness of the soul and the hygiene of the Spirit. Some fear that this critical reflection on oneself may cause weakness and scruples, while the normal impart should be the opposite, that is a manly frankness, interior sincerity, the maturity of one's judgment, the emancipation of the facile cowardice of the one who listens to the pressures of the environment rather than the liberating command of the conscience.
 - D. RP 31: An indispensable condition is the rectitude and clarity of the penitent's conscience. People cannot come to true and genuine repentance until they realize that sin is contrary to the ethical norm written in their inmost being; until they admit that they have had a personal and responsible experience of this contrast; until they say not only that "sin exists" but also "I have sinned"; until they admit that sin has introduced a division into their consciences, which then pervades their whole being and separates them from God and from their brothers and sisters. The sacramental sign of this clarity of conscience is the act traditionally called the examination of conscience, an act that must never be one of anxious psychological introspection but a sincere and calm comparison with the interior moral law, with the evangelical norms

proposed by the Church, with Jesus Christ himself who is our Teacher and Model of life, and with the heavenly Father, who calls us to goodness and perfection.

- E. Not just a review of sinful actions, but correspondence to grace. Ends with:
1. Thank you
 2. Sorry
 3. Help me more!
- F. Cormac Burke, *Conscience and Freedom*, 25:
1. “Conscience is a precious but delicate guide. Its voice is easily distorted or obscured. To dictate to conscience is to silence and, eventually, to destroy it. Conscience must be listened to and listened to sensitively. It needs to be interrogated, even to be cross-examined. And only those who habitually interrogate their conscience and are ready to pay heed even to its awkward answers, will not cheat their conscience or be cheated by it.”
- G. Curé of Ars
1. St. John Vianney cautioned people to look not just at the sins but at the relationship they wound. We need to look at our correspondence to the God of the commandments and not just the commandments of God. An examination of conscience is far more than a forensic accounting of moral deficits, but a look at how and why we’ve chosen against God and those he loves.
 2. He also said that the examination nevertheless needs to be a thorough and regular accounting. The Curé of Ars once counseled a businessman who had made a poor examination, “It is necessary to put your conscience in better order than you put in order your business affairs.” The stakes of one’s soul are far more important than of one’s money. If we’re going to take our “moral bottom line” more seriously than a businessman takes his economic health, Vianney taught, “we will do well to make an examination of conscience every night.” It is easier to make reconciliations on a daily basis, after all, than to try to do it over the course of a week, months or years. A general examination of conscience at night before going to bed is a crucially important practice in the Christian spiritual life in general and a *sine qua non* for becoming a holy penitent.
- H. Studying of cases of conscience
1. Fundamental way of training confessors for many years.
 2. Applicable to everyone
- I. Going to Confession
1. See our need for God’s grace by seeing clearly how we haven’t corresponded.
 2. Get concrete advice, when the whole Church exists for you.
- J. Receiving Spiritual direction
1. Speak about our big decisions in dialogue with someone hopefully more advanced in the Christian life.
 2. **Msgr. Livio Melina:** St. Ignatius of Loyola has a rule for the discernment of spirits, to understand if the spirit that inspires me and leads me to judgment and actions is good, mine, or bad. We have to discern what the spirit is. The 13th rule is formulated this way: to judge and capture the truth in every point, we have to be disposed to say that white is black and black is white if the Holy Roman Catholic Church, the Spouse of Christ and my mother, says it. This Church has the same author as the author of the Ten Commandments. He’s not denying the conscience. We have to be disposed to let go of our own experiences. The Holy Spirit is given to the Church. Ignatius attributes to the Church two titles above all, Spouse of Christ and Mother. It generates us and has a paschal character. Our Christian subjectivity has to be disposed to verify our own convictions in the ecclesial context. We’re not talking about denying reason, but verifying it ecclesially. This is a rule given to verify the conscience.
- XIII. Confronting of silence of conscience
- A. Ratzinger spoke about forming the conscience of young: “It was my impression that if you begin to explain it with the contrast to the world, they begin to understand the silence, a collective silence of conscience which is the destruction of man.” They might not see the evil in communism, but they see it elsewhere, in Nazism. “If we can find the elements where our youth are sensitive and have the capacity to understand then they will see that a silent social conscience at the same time causes the destruction of man. They will also begin to think and reflect that even in their own life they are blind, because they are part of the silence

of conscience. It is possible with a certain analysis of our circumstances, our situation, to renew the sense of conscience that is the voice of Christ within our conscience.

- B. The Pharisee with the publican has a completely clear conscience. But this silence of conscience makes him impenetrable to God and men, while the cry of conscience that plagues the tax collector makes him capable of truth and love.

XIV. Avoiding sin

- A. Habitual sin can lead to the dulling of the conscience when one ceases to confess.
- B. Issues of faith often flow from issues of morality. (Bishop Connolly story.)

XV. Developing the virtues

- A. True conscience always presents a challenge, like the steep and narrow way of the Gospel that stands in stark contrast to the broad and easy way that leads to eternal sorrow. True conscience gives those who follow it a peace and joy that no external thing can trouble.
- B. Fr. Wojciech Giertych, OP: Some people manage to perceive the truth, but fail to put it into practice due to lack of virtues. Their conscience can issue true statements, but they fail to act in a moral way. In time, if this is not overcome, they will begin to question the standards conscience perceives. We are a composite whole and if we lack perseverance, in time we back out from truth. We can ask ourselves to what extent the prevalent subjectivity in culture is a result of the lack of moral vigor and the lack of sound philosophy. The lack of moral strength can be the result of the lack of a father figure in education. There may be the lack of a personal relationship with God which permits the overcoming of difficulties when we've failed, and by which we can let him pick us up and return to him and the moral standards. The lack may be caused by the failure to express the assertive emotions. In such cases, the judgment of conscience may be true, but very little will flow out of it. The divine image is manifested in the charity of the Christian and perfected by his free choice in accord with the truth we perceive.

C. Martyrdom

1. The martyrdom of saints shows that following conscience is not necessarily easy, like the martyrdom of Saint Thomas More. He followed his conscience to the end.
2. Ratzinger: Newman shows that "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 that 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 of conscience. First, conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste. Secondly, conscience cannot be reduced to social advantage, group consensus or the demands of political and social power."

XVI. Not being conformed to the world

- A. VS 62. Certainly, in order to have a "good conscience" (1 Tim 1:5), man must seek the truth and must make judgments in accordance with that same truth. As the Apostle Paul says, the conscience must be "confirmed by the Holy Spirit" (cf. Rom 9:1); it must be "clear" (2 Tim 1:3); it must not "practice cunning and tamper with God's word", but "openly state the truth" (cf. 2 Cor 4:2). On the other hand, the Apostle also warns Christians: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).
- B. Polling does this. Peer pressure affects it. "85% of people think something is wrong" has a strong weight today.

XVII. Being conformed to the Truth

- A. Conscience means cum-scientia, to know together with the truth.
- B. VS 63. It is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives. In the case of the correct conscience, it is a question of the "objective truth" received by man; in the case of the erroneous conscience, it is a question of what man, mistakenly, "subjectively" considers to be true. It is never acceptable to confuse a "subjective" error about moral good with the "objective" truth rationally proposed to man in virtue of his

end, or to make the moral value of an act performed with a true and correct conscience equivalent to the moral value of an act performed by following the judgment of an erroneous conscience.[108] It is possible that the evil done as the result of invincible ignorance or a non-culpable error of judgment may not be imputable to the agent; but even in this case it does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good. Furthermore, a good act which is not recognized as such does not contribute to the moral growth of the person who performs it; it does not perfect him and it does not help to dispose him for the supreme good. Thus, before feeling easily justified in the name of our conscience, we should reflect on the words of the Psalm: "Who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (Ps 19:12). There are faults which we fail to see but which nevertheless remain faults, because we have refused to walk towards the light (cf. Jn 9:39-41).

C. Living Example of Christ

1. He is the truth incarnate who sets us free. He came to give witness to the truth
2. He is the exemplar. Love one another as I have loved you. I have done this as an example, so that just as I have done this for you, you may do so for each other.

D. Lives of the Saints

1. St. Edith Stein, reading the life of St. Teresa, this is the truth.

E. VS 64. Christians have a great help for the formation of conscience "in the Church and her Magisterium." As the Council affirms: "In forming their consciences the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. Her charge is to announce and teach authentically that truth which is Christ, and at the same time with her authority to declare and confirm the principles of the moral order which derive from human nature itself".[111]

XVIII. Choosing in accord with conscience

- A. CCC 1786 Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them.
- B. CCC 1787 Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law.
- C. CCC 1788 To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.
- D. CCC 1789 Some rules apply in every case:
 1. One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
 2. The Golden Rule: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."[56]
 3. Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one's neighbor and his conscience: "Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience ... you sin against Christ."[57] Therefore "it is right not to ... do anything that makes your brother stumble."[58]
- E. Experience helps.

XIX. Seeking communion

- A. Msgr. Livio Melina: Conscience implies the reference to communion. Cum-scire, to know together. The truth that is within conscience is a universal knowledge. It strikes everyone within. We find this in GS 16. The formation of the conscience, and the path of the conscience to the truth, demands a communion with other persons. It demands a docility. We have to be teachable by the truth. These two characteristics, open to the truth and to communion, means that the conscience isn't autonomous or self-sufficient, but is in relation with others.
- B. To form consciences, it's not enough just to impart info, but form communities that live the virtues, such as family, school, parish, government, media, entertainment...
- C. For Ratzinger, community is essential to the formation of conscience. Germans learned how the community itself can become disordered and not be the ultimate guarantor of moral rectitude if there is not a higher Guarantor still. He told the bishops in 1984, "Everything depends on God, on a God who is Creator and on a God who has revealed Himself." This is not a God over against the community but One encountered

precisely in the community. We also “need the community that can guarantee God, whom no one on his own could dare bring into his life.” This community is, of course, the Church.

Conclusion

1. The Church puts herself always and only at the “service of conscience,” as John Paul II said.
2. Let us ask for God’s grace that we may be good and faithful servants in this task which is at the heart of the New Evangelization, the Year of Faith, and the salvation of souls!