



*Conscience and Truth  
in the writings of  
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John Henry Newman's statements about conscience are among the most beautiful and relevant texts which he left to us. Not by coincidence, he is sometimes called *Doctor conscientiae – teacher of conscience*.

In the context of a symposium in 1990, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – Pope Benedict XVI – told the audience how in his early years at Freising Major Seminary he became familiar with Newman through the Prefect Alfred Läpple. Among other things he said, “For us at that time, Newman’s teaching on conscience became an important foundation for theological personalism, which was drawing us all into its sway. Our image of the human being as well as our image of the Church was permeated by this point of departure. We had experienced the claim of a totalitarian party, which understood itself as the fulfilment of history and which negated the conscience of the individual. One of its leaders had said, ‘I have no conscience. My conscience is Adolf Hitler.’ The appalling devastation of humanity that followed was before our eyes. So, it was liberating and essential for us to know that the ‘we’ of the Church does not rest on a cancellation of conscience, but that, exactly the opposite, it can only develop from conscience”.<sup>1</sup>

These words underline the importance of Newman’s teaching on conscience. Conscience is an interior rampart against any form of totalitarianism and at the same time disposes people for “knowledge-with” (*con-scientia*) someone else. Whoever follows the path of conscience does not allow him or herself to be misused and does not remain imprisoned in an egocentric world. Such a person has an open heart for others and for the One who is Truth and Love. Newman interprets conscience as the advocate of truth in the innermost part of the human person. His personal path of life is an impressive endorsement of this fundamental conviction. In a contribution as short as this one, it is not possible to adequately demonstrate the relationship of conscience and truth in John Henry Newman. We will have to be content with some brief observations which introduce the life of this great thinker and his teaching concerning conscience. In the first part, we will briefly follow the path on which Newman gradually discovered the light of truth more clearly through obedience to his conscience. In the second part, we more systematically summarise a few of his core thoughts about the relationship of conscience and truth.

## I. Conscience and Truth in Newman's life<sup>2</sup>

John Henry Newman, born on the 21<sup>st</sup> February 1801 in London, grew up in a middle-class, Anglican environment. His mother introduced him to the Bible early on, but did not succeed in leading him to a personal belief. In Newman's family, religion was somewhat a matter of feelings and habits. At school John Henry was distinguished by his extraordinary talents but he had no secure religious foundation. He later wrote about this time in his diary, "I recollect (in 1815 I believe) thinking I should like to be virtuous, but not religious. There was something in the latter idea I did not like. Nor did I see the *meaning* of loving God".<sup>3</sup> The temptation of the young Newman was to agree to ethical values, but to reject the living God. In the midst of such trials the first great change in his life occurred, which he repeatedly called his 'first conversion'.

### "Myself and my Creator" – The First Conversion

In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman writes about his conversion, "When I was fifteen, (in the autumn of 1816,) a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influences of a definite Creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured".<sup>4</sup> How did this great change in the thoughts of this 15 year old come about? The Newman family had unexpectedly fallen into a financial crisis and John Henry, who had become ill, had to remain at his boarding school during the summer holiday of 1816. Inspired by one of his teachers, he read the book *The Force of Truth* by the Calvinist Thomas Scott. This book changed him radically. He came to a personal belief in God and recognized how fleeting the things of this world are, "isolating me", as he describes it, "from the objects which surrounded me, in confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator".<sup>5</sup>

Newman's spirit was so seized by the reality of God's existence that he soon decided to remain celibate. He wanted to be fully available for the task which God would show him. The virtuous student who had not seen sense in loving God changed into a young man filled with faith, who in his conscience recognised God as the centre of life, and who trustfully put his future into his Creator's hands. Newman's transformation is aptly expressed in the words which he then embraced as a motto: "Holiness rather than peace," and "Growth: the only evidence of life".

After this "first conversion", Newman stood on a firm foundation of faith. This foundation was dogma, revealed truth. "From the age of fifteen, dogma

has been the fundamental principle of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery”.<sup>6</sup> On this way of faith Newman let himself be guided above all by his conscience, which he orientated to Holy Scripture. Through his conversion he came to recognise the voice of conscience as the echo of God’s voice. At that time he wrote, “For indeed I find I have very great need of some monitor to direct me, and I sincerely trust that my conscience, enlightened by the Bible, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, may prove a faithful and vigilant guardian of the true principles of religion”.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. “Responsibility for souls” – In the Service of the Church**

At 16 years of age, Newman began his university studies at Trinity College in Oxford. He dedicated himself intensely to his studies. He led a rather secluded life and faithfully sought to follow the living God who had moved him in the depths of his conscience. After three years he took his final exams. Soon after, he became a Fellow of the renowned Oriel College.

At this time, he decided to put his whole life at the service of the Church. When he was ordained an Anglican deacon in 1824, he wrote the following meaningful words in his diary, “I have the responsibility of souls on me to the day of my death”.<sup>8</sup> After his first conversion Newman’s faith was focused on his personal relationship with his Creator. Now, in a second step, the dimension of being responsible for other people grew in him. He understood that faithfulness to God demands the willingness to serve others.

This awakened sense of responsibility urged Newman to give himself incessantly for the well-being of others. He aimed at leading them to an awareness of their duty towards God and their neighbour. It was especially important to him to have personal contact, to give personal witness. As a deacon in the poor parish of St Clement’s in Oxford he not only fulfilled the traditional task of preaching but also started to visit people at home. At that time, this was a new and rather unusual way of pastoral care. When he was later ordained an Anglican priest and appointed Vicar of the University parish of St Mary’s, he sought to touch the consciences of others through sermons and personal encounters. He wanted to call people to conversion. He wanted to awaken and strengthen in them a personal faith in God and fidelity to the truths of the Gospel.

At Oriel College he sought to accompany the students in more than just their intellectual education. He was also intent on being a friend and companion to them. Newman was an educator through and through. He always had the consciences of others in the forefront of his mind. He knew his responsibility for souls. His more than 20,000 letters lend an

impressive testimony to this. In dealing with his students, Newman always wanted to build up, not tear down. “If there is any thing that was abhorrent to me, it was the scattering doubts and unsettling consciences without necessity.”<sup>9</sup> He was a pastor totally given to his ministry who cared for everybody in a personal manner. It is no coincidence that later he chose for his coat of arms as a Cardinal the motto: “Cor ad Cor loquitur”.

### **3. “My desire has been to have Truth for my chiefest Friend.” – From Light to Light**

Influenced by the High Church leanings of some of his friends, Newman started to systematically read the Church Fathers in the summer of 1828. He began with Ignatius of Antioch and Justin, and then studied the Alexandrian Fathers as well as Ambrose, Augustine, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, John Chrysostom and, above all, Athanasius.<sup>10</sup> Their writings became for him the key to discovering God’s Revelation in its fullness. Since his conversion he had already thoroughly studied Holy Scripture and had learned large parts of it by heart. Now he gained an inner understanding of the importance of Tradition to which the Church Fathers are outstanding witnesses. It is hardly possibly to overestimate the influence of the Church Fathers on Newman’s religious development. He himself witnessed later, “The Fathers made me a Catholic, and I am not going to kick down the ladder by which I ascended into the Church”.<sup>11</sup>

In 1832, Newman published his first extensive study on the Arians of the Fourth Century. Looking for the fullness of truth and allowing himself to be inspired by the Fathers, he saw with great concern that the influence of liberal trends was increasing all over England, and that religious principles were being pushed more and more out of University education and public life. This knowledge moved him, along with some of his friends, to bring the Oxford Movement to life in 1833. The fundamental conviction of this Movement was that England had fallen away from the faith of the Ancient Church and that it needed a “second reformation” that would renew the Church of England in the spirit of the Fathers. The leaders of the movement influenced others through their personal witness, their extensive preaching and the publication of the so-called ‘Tracts’. These were pamphlets which were distributed in Oxford, and later in other cities of England, pamphlets which struck like lightning from a clear sky.

Three principles animated the movement: the dogmatic principle which opposed religious liberalism and which regarded Christianity as having its foundation in revealed truth; the sacramental principle, which maintains that Christ founded a visible Church with sacraments that is guided by the bishops as successors of the Apostles; and the anti-Roman principle, by which the accusation of popery that was soon to follow would be warded

off. Newman himself bore an anti-Roman sentiment which had been impressed upon him by his surroundings. He called on the faithful to be as on-guard against Rome as against the plague.

Following these principles, he sought to revive faith in the Incarnate Son of God, whom he had discovered as being present in the Church through his reading of the Church Fathers. At the same time, he understood that it was necessary to put the Church of England on a more solid theological foundation. He gave series of lectures on the importance of the teaching office of the Church and on the doctrine of justification. He further developed the theory of the “Via Media” which emanated from the great scholars of the Anglican tradition. According to this theory, the Reformers had forfeited the truths of the original faith and Catholics had deformed the faith of the Church by means of additions and errors; the Anglicans however formed the “Via Media”, being faithful to the Church of Christ and the Fathers. In his studies, Newman wanted nothing else but simply to serve truth. “My desire hath been to have Truth for my chiefest friend, and no enemy but error”.<sup>12</sup>

The theory of the Via Media had a problem, however. Is truth always to be found in the ‘middle’? Studying the Ancient Church, Newman came to the conclusion that the answer to this question is ‘No’. He understood that a ‘Via Media’ had existed, for example, as early as the fourth century: the Semi-Arians who had wanted to place themselves in the middle between the Arians and Rome. The truth, however, was not to be found with the Semi-Arians, but on the side of Rome. The theory of the Via Media - which had only existed on paper anyway - collapsed.

In 1841, Newman wrote the final Tract (Tract 90) in which he tried to interpret the Thirty-Nine Articles - which form the foundation of Anglican belief - in a Catholic way, following the spirit of the Church Fathers. The reaction to this attempt was shattering for him: the University authorities of Oxford condemned Tract 90 and the Anglican bishops of England explicitly rejected Newman’s interpretation. Consequently, he decided to move with some of his friends to Littlemore, a small village close to Oxford of which he had had pastoral care for many years. At Littlemore, he hoped to come to clarity about his future through prayer and study. At that time, he did not know where his way would lead but he was sure that he wanted to follow the light of truth unconditionally. Truth was his passion.

#### **4. “The one Fold of Christ” – Newman’s reception into the Catholic Church**

In the four years that Newman spent at Littlemore, he strove to follow the inner voice of conscience with great fidelity. He was convinced that he

would be granted the necessary insight if he listened to God's voice, prayed ardently and allowed himself to be guided neither by feelings nor by passion but by duty. During these years he kept to the maxim: "*Do what your present state of opinion requires in the light of duty, and let that doing tell: speak by acts*".<sup>13</sup> In 1843, he retracted all his accusations against the Roman Catholic Church, which up to this point he had believed to be a community in allegiance to the Antichrist. He also resigned from his duties as Vicar of the University Church with great sorrow. Following his conscience, he also refrained from pastorally accompanying the many people who turned to him, as he was now himself a seeker. He knew that the blind cannot lead the blind.

We see how much Newman was wrestling interiorly from a letter he wrote several months before his reception into the Catholic Church: "This I am sure of, that nothing but a simple, direct call of duty is a warrant for any one leaving our Church; no preference of another Church, no delight in its services, no hope of greater religious advancement in it, no indignation, no disgust at the persons and things among which we may find ourselves in the Church of England. The simple question is, Can *I* (it is personal, not whether another, but can *I*) be saved in the English Church? am *I* in safety, were I to die tonight? Is it a mortal sin in *me*, not joining another communion?"<sup>14</sup>

The quest for the Church was not insignificant to Newman. He recognised in his conscience that it was a question concerning his salvation.

However, he still had difficulties with 'newer' Roman teachings and practices: for example, the invocation of Our Lady and the Saints, the doctrine of purgatory, indulgences and the veneration of relics. He asked himself if these were not distortions of the pure faith of the Ancient Church. He therefore decided to write a study, *The Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). The result of this study was for him decisive. He recalls, "As I advanced, my difficulties so cleared away that I ceased to speak of 'the Roman Catholics,' and boldly called them Catholics. Before I got to the end, I resolved to be received, and the book remains in the state in which it was then, unfinished".<sup>15</sup> As was his habit, Newman followed the voice of truth as soon as he came to hear and understand it. On the 9<sup>th</sup> October 1845, he was received by the Italian Passionist Blessed Dominic Barberi into the Church which he had come to recognize as the "the one Fold of Christ".<sup>16</sup>

At the age of 44, Newman left relatives and friends, profession and office, honour and career. Like a second Augustine, he followed in faith the call of God which had taken hold of his conscience. In the Catholic Church, he bore more than a little suffering, but his conscience was at peace. "From the time that I became a Catholic, of course, I have no further history of my religious opinions to narrate. In saying this, I do not mean to say that my

mind has been idle, or that I have given up thinking on theological subjects, but that I have had no variations to record and have had no anxiety of heart whatever. I have been in perfect peace and contentment; I never have had one doubt. ... it was like coming into port after a rough sea; and my happiness on that score remains to this day without interruption".<sup>17</sup>

## II. Conscience and Truth in Newman's Teaching<sup>18</sup>

Newman found that conscience and truth belong together in partnership, that they support and enlighten each other – indeed, that obedience to conscience leads to obedience to the truth. In the rest of this article, we wish to touch upon the connection between conscience and truth in the fundamental element of Newman's teaching. By referring to his own experience in his teaching about conscience, Newman reveals himself as a modern and personalistic thinker, influenced by Augustine. It might be useful in our reflections first to enter briefly into Newman's notion of conscience.

### 1. Newman's Notion of Conscience

The notion of conscience has many diverse interpretations, some contradictory. Newman describes the crucial reason for these contradictions with the following words, "Conscience—there are two ways of regarding conscience; *one* as a mere sort of sense of propriety, a taste teaching us to do this or that, the *other* as the echo of God's voice. Now all depends on this distinction—the first way is not of faith, and the second is of faith".<sup>19</sup>

In his famous *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1874) Newman looks closely at two contrary notions of conscience. The interpretation of conscience as restricted to the material world he describes like this, "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... 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 licence to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again... 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".<sup>20</sup>

This description is essentially valid in our time too. Today also, conscience is confused with personal opinion, subjective feelings, and self-will. For many, it no longer implies the responsibility of the creature towards its Creator, but complete independence, total autonomy, overall subjectivity and arbitrariness. The sanctuary of the conscience has been “desacralised”. God has been banned from conscience. The consequences of this godless notion of conscience are painfully before our eyes. Because of this emancipation from God, man is also inclined to separate himself from his neighbour. He lives in his egocentric world often without caring for others, without being interested in them, without feeling responsible for them. Individualism, the pursuit of pleasure, honour, and power, and unbounded unpredictability make the world dark and the ability of people to live together in society ever more difficult.

In the face of this purely worldly interpretation, Newman holds fast to his transcendental interpretation.<sup>21</sup> For him, conscience is not an autonomous but a fundamentally theonomous reality – a sanctuary by which God turns intimately and personally to every soul. In union with the great teachers of the Church, Newman affirms that the Creator has implanted his own law into his rational creatures. “This law, as apprehended in the minds of individual men, is called ‘conscience’; and though it may suffer refraction in passing into the intellectual medium of each, it is not therefore so affected as to lose its character of being the Divine Law, but still has, as such, the prerogative of commanding obedience”.<sup>22</sup> We have to obey our conscience because it claims to be the echo of the voice of God, but we also have the duty to form it so that it allows God’s law to shine through as purely as possible and without refraction.

Newman himself describes the importance and the dignity of conscience with magnificent words: “The rule and measure of duty is not utility, nor expedience, nor the happiness of the greatest number, nor State convenience, nor fitness, order, and the *pulchrum*. 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”.<sup>23</sup>

In his conscience, man does not only hear the voice of his own self. Newman compares conscience with an angel – a messenger of God who talks to us behind a veil. Indeed, he even dares to call conscience the original Vicar of Christ and to attribute to it the offices of prophet, king and priest. Conscience is a prophet because it tells us in advance whether the act

is good or bad. It is a king because it exhorts us with authority: “Do this, avoid that”. It is a priest because it blesses us after a good deed – this means not only the delightful experience of a good conscience, but also the blessing which goodness brings in any case to people and to the world – and likewise “condemns” after an evil deed, as an expression of the gnawing bad conscience and of the negative effects of sin on men and their surroundings. It is a principle that is written in the being of every person. It asks for obedience and refers to one outside of itself: to God – for one’s own sake and the sake of others.

## 2. Conscience and God

The Second Vatican Council teaches, “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths”.<sup>24</sup> Newman is convinced that in our conscience we hear the echo of God’s voice. Even more, he sees conscience as the way to come to recognize the living God.

In his great work *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), he attempts to prove the existence of God based on the experience of conscience. In his analysis, he distinguishes between the *moral sense* and the *sense of duty*.<sup>25</sup> By moral sense, he means the judgment of reason of whether an act is good or evil. By sense of duty, he means the authoritative command to follow good or to avoid evil. Newman bases his reflections particularly on the second aspect of the experience of conscience.

Because conscience is “imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience”, it has “an intimate bearing on our affections and emotions”.<sup>26</sup> Very simply paraphrasing, we could summarise Newman’s train of thought – which must not be misunderstood in the sense of a mere psychologism – with the following words: if we follow the command of our conscience, we are filled with happiness, joy and peace; if we do not obey our conscience, we are overcome by shame, terror and fear. Newman interprets this experience in the following way: “If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on our receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away... and thus the phenomena of

Conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive”.<sup>27</sup>

Newman knows that conscience does not automatically lead people to God. It can only refer to God, then, if the voice of conscience is not defined as something solely immanent, but rather is seen in its transcendental character. If so perceived, it can imprint on people the image of a personal God, of a supreme lawgiver and judge. In this sense, conscience is not only the first principle of ethics, but also of religion.

Newman prefers a pathway to God beginning with conscience to the traditional proofs of the existence of God. Some consider this a limitation in Newman’s thought and reproach him for having overemphasised interiority. Newman does not reject the classic proofs of the existence of God, but he is convinced that they lead to a merely abstract image of God – to the image of a God who is the first cause of everything, who orders everything, who is the creator and leader of the world. Newman’s way to God, however, points to a God who has a personal relationship with every person, who addresses him, who directs and guides him, who rebukes and reprimands, who shows him his mistakes and calls him to conversion, who leads him to the perception of the truth and who spurs him on to do good, who is his supreme Lord and Judge.

### **3. Conscience and Faith**

Newman goes even further and comes to the conviction that obedience to conscience disposes men’s hearts to faith in revelation<sup>28</sup>. In his magnificent discourse, *Dispositions for Faith* (1856), Newman provides a few arguments that support this conclusion.

Again, he first bases his arguments on the fact that conscience is an authoritative voice that gives relentless commands. These commands demand obedience; and obedience is precisely the interior disposition which makes it easy for people to accept faith, the truth of Revelation: “...for, beginning with obedience, they go on to the intimate perception and belief of one God. His voice within them witnesses to Him, and they believe His own witness about Himself... This, then, is the first step in those good dispositions which lead to faith in the Gospel”.<sup>29</sup> Humility and obedience are the fundamental attitudes of the believer. He who willingly practices obedience to the voice of conscience will not find it difficult to accept revelation in obedience of faith. Why could Lydia, a seller of purple goods, accept the preaching of Saint Paul so quickly so as to be the first European to come to the faith (cf. Act 16:14)? For Newman, the answer is clear: she had lived in the

fear of God and had already learned to obey the voice of God in her conscience. The correlation between this interior voice and the preaching of the Apostle made it easy for her to accept obediently the Christian faith.

In a second point, Newman explains that although the voice of conscience is peremptory and commanding, it is not infrequent that it speaks softly and unclearly. Often it is difficult for people to discern the appeals of conscience from those which come from passions, from pride and self-love. “So the gift of conscience raises a desire for what it does not itself fully supply. It inspires in them the idea of authoritative guidance, of a divine law; and the desire of possessing it in its *fullness*, not in mere fragmentary portions or indirect suggestion. It creates in them a thirst, an impatience, for the knowledge of that Unseen Lord, and Governor, and Judge, who as yet speaks to them only secretly, who whispers in their hearts, who tells them something, but not nearly so much as they wish and as they need... Such is the definition, I may say, of every religious man, who has not the knowledge of Christ; he is on the look-out”.<sup>30</sup> The demands of conscience are often unclear and therefore they oblige people to be watchful. They arouse the desire for a clear and secure orientation, which comes from God and which is not submitted to the influence of sin and error.

Another thought brings Newman to the same conclusion: “The more a person tries to obey his conscience, the more he gets alarmed at himself, for obeying it so imperfectly. His sense of duty will become more keen, and his perception of transgression more delicate, and he will understand more and more how many things he has to be forgiven. But next, while he thus grows in self-knowledge, he also understands more and more clearly that the voice of conscience has nothing gentle, nothing of mercy in its tone. It is severe, and even stern. It does not speak of forgiveness, but of punishment. It suggests to him a future judgment; it does not tell him how he can avoid it”.<sup>31</sup> Conscience is a harsh master. Merciless, it holds our sins before our eyes, but cannot redeem us from this burden. So it arouses in us the longing for true peace and reconciliation with God. This longing finds its fulfilment only in the message of the Redeemer who has reconciled us with God through the sacrifice of his life.

Newman, of course, knows the essential difference between conscience and faith. At the same time, he keeps to his conviction that obedience to the light received is the way to receive more light. “Follow your own sense of right, and you will gain from that very obedience to your Maker, which natural conscience enjoins, a conviction of the truth and power of that Redeemer whom a supernatural message has revealed”.<sup>32</sup> Newman can testify from his own experience “that obedience to conscience leads to obedience to the Gospel, which, instead of being something different altogether, is but the completion and perfection of that religion which natural conscience teaches”.<sup>33</sup>

Obedience to one's conscience prepares the heart for faith in the particular revelation of God, which in turn purifies and enlightens conscience. It is in Holy Scripture, according to Newman, that man will "find all those vague conjectures and imperfect notions about truth, which his own heart taught him, abundantly sanctioned, completed, and illustrated".<sup>34</sup> By accepting Revelation in faith, conscience changes from a simple orientation to faith to actually being orientated by faith. Revealed truth enlightens the conscience and makes it capable of making surer judgments in practical situations and to live daily life in accordance with the Gospel. For this reason, the Christian conscience is qualitatively different from the conscience of someone who does not know Revelation, even if in its essence it remains the same.

#### 4. Conscience and Church

Finally, Newman takes us another step further, one that is linked to the inner logic of his life and his thought: obedience to conscience leads people to faith in God as their Redeemer, and awakens in their hearts a longing that spurs them on towards the fullness of truth in the one Church of Christ.

According to Newman, the basic ethical attitudes brought about by obedience to conscience form an "*organum investigandi* given us for gaining religious truth, and which would lead the mind by an infallible succession from the rejection of atheism to theism, and from theism to Christianity, and from Christianity to Evangelical Religion, and from these to Catholicity".<sup>35</sup> In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman writes the bold words, "I came to the conclusion that there was no medium, in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity, and that a perfectly consistent mind, under those circumstances in which it finds itself here below, must embrace either the one or the other. And I hold this still: I am a Catholic by virtue of my believing in a God; and if I am asked why I believe in a God, I answer that it is because I believe in myself, for I feel it impossible to believe in my own existence (and of that fact I am quite sure) without believing also in the existence of Him, who lives as a Personal, All-seeing, All-judging Being in my conscience".<sup>36</sup>

Newman's most important statements in regard to conscience and Church are to be found in the previously cited *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*. In this work, Newman refutes the accusation that Catholics could no longer be faithful subjects of the Crown after the doctrine of papal infallibility had been proclaimed, since they would be required to give their consciences over to the Pope. Masterfully Newman explains the relationship between the authority of conscience and the authority of the Pope.<sup>37</sup>

The authority of the Pope is based on Revelation, which God has given out of pure kindness. God has entrusted his revelation to the Church and takes care that it is infallibly preserved, interpreted and transmitted in and through the Church. If a person has accepted the mission of the Church in faith, nothing else but this person's conscience commands him to listen to the Church and the Pope. Therefore Newman says: "...did the Pope speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act. He would be cutting the ground from under his feet. His very mission is to proclaim the moral law, and to protect and strengthen that 'Light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world'. On the law of conscience and its sacredness are founded both his authority in theory and his power in fact... The championship of the Moral Law and of conscience is his *raison d'être*. The fact of his mission is the answer to the complaints of those who feel the insufficiency of the natural light; and the insufficiency of that light is the justification of his mission".<sup>38</sup> We do not obey the Pope because someone forces us to do so, but because we are personally convinced in faith that the Lord guides the Church through him, and through the bishops in union with him, and that He keeps his Church in the truth.

The conscience enlightened by faith leads to a mature obedience to the Pope and the Church. The Pope and the Church in turn enlighten the conscience, which needs clear orientation and accompaniment. "But the sense of right and wrong, which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand".<sup>39</sup> The Church in this sense is not only a great help for the individual, but it also renders an irreplaceable service for society as it is the defender of the irrevocable rights and freedom of human beings. These rights and this freedom, which are rooted in the dignity of the person, build the foundation of modern democracies, but cannot be subjected to the democratic rule of majorities. If the Church reminds us of the singular dignity of the human person, created by God and redeemed by Christ, it accomplishes a fundamental mission in society.

According to Newman, it is impossible for conscience to come into direct conflict with the doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church, for conscience has no authority in questions of revealed truth; the Church is its infallible guardian. Newman knows that "as regards doctrine, the 'supremacy of conscience' is not an adequate account of what I should consider safe to say on the subject".<sup>40</sup> Whether someone accepts a revealed truth that has been defined by the Church is not primarily a question of conscience, but of faith.

Whoever thinks, therefore, that he must reject a doctrinal truth on grounds of conscience, cannot actually be referring to his conscience. Or better expressed: his conscience is not – or not yet – enlightened by faith. The conscience of the believer, however, is a conscience which is formed by faith and by the Church.

Newman does not deny that the authority of the Church and of the Pope have limits. It has nothing to do with arbitrariness or worldly models of domineering; it is indissolubly linked to the infallible *sensus fidei* of the whole People of God and the specific mission of theologians. The authority of the Church reaches as far as Revelation. If the Pope makes decisions with regard to Church structures, discipline and administration, his statements do not claim to be infallible. This is even more so when the Pope takes position in regard to present-day questions, for example, with regard to politics.

The believer will normally listen to such decisions and announcements attentively and will accept them so as not to endanger the unity of the Church. In particular cases, however, the believer can come to a different conclusion in questions of this kind, one which does not accord with that of the Pope. However, here also Newman employs strict benchmarks. “*Prima 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 rumour 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 scepticism. He must have no wilful 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. If this necessary rule were observed, collisions between the Pope’s authority and the authority of conscience would be very rare. On the other hand, in the fact that, after all, in extraordinary cases, the conscience of each individual is free, we have a safeguard and security, ... that no Pope ever will be able ... to create a false conscience for his own ends.”<sup>41</sup>

In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Newman concludes his explanations about conscience with the oft-quoted words, “Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.”<sup>42</sup> These words, which Newman probably formulated with a twinkle in his eye, mean above all that our obedience to the Pope is not a blind obedience but one based on a conscience enlightened by faith. He who has accepted the mission of the Church in faith will obey the Church out of his inner conviction founded on his conscience. Indeed, in

this respect a conscience enlightened by faith comes first, and then the Pope.

Newman faithfully upholds the mutual interaction of conscience and Church. To refer to Newman's words with the intention of pitting the authority of conscience against the authority of the Pope is incorrect. Each of the authorities, both the subjective and the objective, remain dependent and linked to the other: the Pope to conscience and conscience to the Pope.

## Final remarks

In today's language, there are various ways in which the word 'conscience' is used. Through his life and his teaching, John Henry Newman can help us to grasp anew the importance of conscience as the echo of God's voice and to describe it, thus safeguarding it from deficient notions. Newman understood how to show the dignity of conscience clearly without differing from objective truth. He would not say "yes" to conscience, "no" to God or faith or Church, but rather "yes" to conscience and therefore "yes" to God, to faith and to the Church. Conscience is the defender of truth in our hearts. It is "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ".

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> M.K. Stolz, M. Binder (Eds.), John Henry Newman, Lover of Truth, Rome 1991, p. 142 – English: L'Osservatore Romano (weekly edition), N. 22, 1 June 2005, 9.

<sup>2</sup> We have to limit ourselves in this overview, which necessarily remains incomplete, to quotations of Newman himself. From the wealth of recent literature about Newman's life the following works stand out: Ian Ker, John Henry Newman. A Biography, Oxford <sup>2</sup> 2010; José Morales Marín, Newman (1801/1890), Madrid 1990; Vincent Ferrer Blehl, Pilgrim Journey. John Henry Newman 1801-1845, London – New York 2001; Günter Biemer, Die Wahrheit wird stärker sein. Das Leben Kardinal Newmans, Frankfurt am Main <sup>3</sup>2009; Jean Honoré, John Henry Newman. Un homme de Dieu, Paris 2003.

<sup>3</sup> John Henry Newman, Autobiographical Writings, London 1955, p. 169 (= AW).

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, London 1865, p. 4 (=Apo).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>6</sup> Apo, 49.

<sup>7</sup> AW, 152.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>9</sup> Apo, 215.

<sup>10</sup> There are many studies about Newman and the Church Fathers. Here are mentioned but a few more recent contributions: Francis McGrath, Introduction, in: John Henry Newman, The Church of the Fathers, Leominster – Notre Dame 2002, XI-LXXIX; Association

Francaise des Amis de John Henry Newman, Newman et les Pères de l'Eglise: Etudes Newmaniennes, Paris 2005; Inos Biffi, I Profili storici di John Henry Newman in: Evandro Botto, Hermann Geissler (Eds.), Una ragionevole fede. Logos e dialogo in John Henry Newman, Milano 2009, 155-181; Kathleen Dietz, John Henry Newman and the Fathers of the Church: The Birth of an Ecclesiology, in: Evandro Botto, Hermann Geissler (Eds.), Una ragionevole fede: Logos e dialogo in John Henry Newman, Milano 2009, 211-220.

<sup>11</sup> John Henry Newman, Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching, Vol. II., London 1896, 24 (=Diff II).

<sup>12</sup> John Henry Newman, The Via Media of the Anglican Church, Vol I, Westminster 1978, XII f.

<sup>13</sup> Apo, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 275. It is known that Newman was often misunderstood in his Catholic period and that he had to suffer much, also on account of representatives of the Church. His being deeply rooted in Christ gave him the strength, despite such experiences, to avoid becoming uncertain in his conscience or develop a negative attitude. It would be worthwhile to research more of how he dealt in faith with the wounds in the Church.

<sup>18</sup> As the aim of this contribution is not to touch on single aspects, but on the fundamental connection of conscience and truth in Newman, we refrain from using quotations from the extensive secondary literature and allow Newman alone to speak to us. A few important publications on this topic are: Heinrich Fries, Werner Becker, Günter Biemer (Eds.), Newman-Studien, XI: Beiträge zur Gewissensproblematik in historischer, theologischer und pädagogischer Perspektive, Heroldsberg bei Nürnberg 1980; Hermann Geißler, Gewissen und Wahrheit bei John Henry Kardinal Newman, Frankfurt am Main 1995; Roman Siebenrock, Wahrheit, Gewissen und Geschichte. Eine systematisch-theologische Rekonstruktion, Sigmaringendorf 1996; Bernhard Trocholepczy, Gewissen: Befähigung und Herausforderung zur conversio continua, in: Günter Biemer, Lothar Kuld (Eds.), Newman-Studien, XVI, Frankfurt am Main 1998, 51-64; Fabio Attard, John Henry Newman. Advocacy of conscience 1825-1832. 1833-1843, in: Salesianum LXII (2000) 331-351, 433-456; LXIII (2001) 315-340, 521-536; Francesco Maceri, La formazione della coscienza del credente. Una proposta educativa alla luce dei Parochial and Plain Sermons di John Henry Newman, Roma – Brescia 2001; Association Francaise des Amis de John Henry Newman, Le Thème de la conscience dans la pensée de Newman: Etudes Newmaniennes, Paris 2007; Drew Morgan, John Henry Newman – Doctor of Conscience: Doctor of the Church?, in: Newman Studies Journal 4 (2007) 5-23.

<sup>19</sup> John Henry Newman, Sermon Notes, Herefordshire – Notre Dame 2000, 327.

<sup>20</sup> Diff II, 250.

<sup>21</sup> It would be interesting in this context to go into the recent discoveries of the humanities, especially of psychology and sociology, and to work out more precisely how the essential claims of Newman are still relevant.

<sup>22</sup> Diff II, 247.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 248 f.

<sup>24</sup> Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> John Henry Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, London 1891, 105 (=GA).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 107f.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 109f.

<sup>28</sup> The connection between conscience and faith is complex. In this article, only single, basic elements of the Newmanian thought are being considered.

<sup>29</sup> John Henry Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, London 1908, 65f.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>32</sup> John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. VIII, Rivingtons 1878, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>34</sup> John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. I, Rivingtons 1877, 217.

<sup>35</sup> GA, 499.

<sup>36</sup> Apo, 198.

<sup>37</sup> On this topic see for example: Jean Honoré, *Autorité dans l'Eglise et liberté de conscience*, in: M.K. Stolz, M. Binder (Eds.), *John Henry Newman. Lover of Truth*, Rome 1991, 61-78; Ian Ker, *Newman, Modernity and Conscience*, in: Evandro Botto, Hermann Geissler (Eds.), *Una ragionevole fede. Logos e dialogo in John Henry Newman*, Milano 2009, 30-38.

<sup>38</sup> Diff II., 252 f.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 253f.

<sup>40</sup> AW, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Diff II, 258.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 261.

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