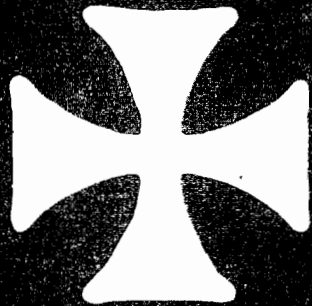


CONSCIENCE AND MORALITY

A Doctrinal Statement of the
Irish Episcopal Conference



On behalf of the Hierarchy of Ireland:

- ✠ Tomás Cardinal Ó Fiaich, Archbishop of Armagh
- ✠ Dermot Ryan, Archbishop of Dublin
- ✠ Thomas Morris, Archbishop of Cashel.
- ✠ Joseph Cunnane, Archbishop of Tuam

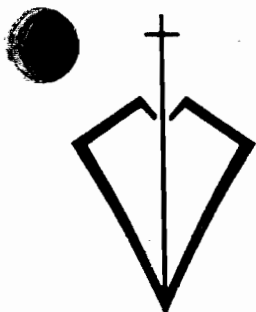
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INTRODUCTION

1. Many people today have come to a new awareness of the central role of conscience in the moral life. Catholics in particular have been led by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council to appreciate more fully the essential link between spiritual growth in Christ and the development of an enlightened and responsible conscience.

On the other hand mistaken views about the role of conscience are quite common. People frequently fail to understand the relationship of conscience to what is morally right and good in itself, or, as it is often called, the objective order of morality. They do not pay enough attention to the fact that our moral choices must always be in accordance with the true nature of the

human person, who is made in the image of God and called to eternal union with him in knowledge and love. People are often confused, too, about the need for an external guide if conscience is to carry out its appointed task. In particular the role of the authoritative teaching of the Church in the formation of the individual Christian conscience is frequently neglected or misunderstood.

We think it opportune therefore to recall briefly, for the guidance of Catholics, a few truths about conscience and morality which the Catholic Church has always taught and which the Second Vatican Council has placed in a new and clearer light. The subject of conscience and morality is a large and complex one, and to deal with it fully would require an extended treatment. We do not aim at such a treatment here, but wish merely to clarify some central points which are not always well understood, and are sometimes presented in a false light in contemporary writings.

MEANING OF CONSCIENCE

2. When we speak of conscience, we think in a general way of a sense of right and wrong and of the fundamental principle that we are to do what is good and avoid what is evil.

In its stricter sense, however, conscience is concerned with the rightness or wrongness of a particular act. It is the practical judgment that this act which we propose to do, or which we have done, is good or evil. By extension, and in popular usage, the habitual power of making such a judgment is called conscience.

And so we say that conscience seeks to discern the moral values at stake in particular situations, and how the individual

should act if he is to respect these values and respond to the demands they make. This can often be a difficult task, and if conscience is to perform it as it should, it needs appropriate direction and guidance. In this respect conscience is sometimes compared to the human eye and its function. As the eye needs the assistance of a lamp to help it see clearly when natural light is no longer adequate, so conscience will often be dependent on a guide to help it find the right course of conduct.

3. In speaking of conscience, the impression may easily be given that it is something separate from the human person — a kind of voice from outside. Help does come from outside: from other people, from the Church, from God himself directly; but the judgment of conscience is made as the individual person brings the light of intelligence to bear on a particular moral issue with which he or she is faced.

My conscience, in other words, is my reason telling me that I must choose the good and avoid evil, and making it possible for me to distinguish between them in practice. It is also my reason passing judgment on my actions once they have been performed, apportioning praise or blame according as I have followed or rejected its commands.

CONSCIENCE AND THE GOSPEL LAW OF LOVE

● In the teaching of Christ the obligation to do good and avoid evil is expressed in terms of love and its requirements. Jesus summed up all the teaching of the Old Testament in the twofold commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength”, and “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”

(Mark 12:30-31). This commandment of love is the centre and summation of the Christian life. An action which is in accordance with the twofold commandment of love is a good action, and an action which conflicts with love is an evil one.

5. This truth, which has always been a fundamental principle in Christian moral teaching, has been re-stated with special force in the writings of recent theologians. By asserting the primacy of charity and of the law of love, they have given a welcome unity to contemporary moral theology. They have corrected the tendency found in some earlier writers to divide moral teaching into a multiplicity of individual commands and prohibitions with no clear master principle behind them. One unhappy effect of this tendency was the legalistic approach to the Sacrament of Penance adopted by some penitents, who seemed to forget that it was not enough to confess individual offences if the disordered self-love that lay at their root was not uncovered and healed.

6. Since conscience is our guide in knowing and doing what is good, it follows that it is the way of love that conscience is obliged to seek. It is in this sense that one can agree with the assertion, frequently heard today, that to follow one's conscience is to do what love requires. No doubt, this way of speaking can easily give rise to misunderstandings, and it is important to be clear on what it really means. Otherwise the way is open for confused and arbitrary moral judgments, and conscience becomes detached from its moorings in the objective order of real human values.

The essential point to note is that the commandment of love was intended to sum up the commandments of the Old Law and not to replace or abolish them, as Our Lord made clear on several occasions. He said that the whole Law and the Prophets hung on the twofold commandment of love (Matt. 22:40). He said he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them (Matt. 5:17). He repeated the precepts of the Decalogue to the rich young man in search of eternal life (Mark 10:19).

7. It is evident, then, that when Jesus enunciated the commandment of love, he was not abandoning the traditional moral teaching which categorised certain actions as moral and others as immoral. He taught that to honour one's parents is good, to murder or commit adultery is bad. Far from abolishing these commandments or prohibitions, he amplified and extended them. He commanded his followers to love even their enemies, he forbade them to commit adultery even in their hearts (Matt. 5:44,28). He listed the kinds of action that make a man unclean: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man" (Mark 7:21-23).

This list is really a spelling out of the kind of action that is incompatible with the central commandment of love of God and love of one's neighbour. Though not of course a complete list, we note that it includes several prohibitions contained in the Ten Commandments, as well as some of the seven capital sins.

Perhaps it is worth remarking in passing that, while the list includes sexual sins, and gives them a prominent place, it is far from identifying the whole of morality with the sexual sphere: the majority of the sins mentioned belong to other areas of conduct. Thus Jesus avoids the two extremes which are often found in popular attitudes to morality: the tendency, on the one hand, to make light of sexual sins, as if they did not really offend against God's commandment of love, or deprive us of his friendship; and, on the other hand, the tendency to see morality predominantly in sexual terms, to the neglect of other fundamental moral values.

8. The apostles, who carried Christ's teaching throughout the world, reaffirmed the primacy of love. Knowing how prone people are to self-deception, they instructed their converts about the kinds of action which are in accordance with love and those which are opposed to it. St. Paul, for whom "love is the

fulfilment of the law” (Rom. 13:10), and who wrote a justly famous description of love in his first Letter to the Corinthians (Ch. 13), was always ready to give guidance on particular questions and judge the morality of specific types of actions. He too listed some of the deeds that spring from self-indulgence rather than genuine love: “immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like” (Gal. 5:19-21).

St. James, too, having called on the readers of his Epistle to observe “the supreme law of Scripture: ‘you must love your neighbour as yourself’ ”, goes on to remind them that God’s law requires us to observe all his commandments without exception. “It was the same person who said, ‘you must not commit adultery’ and ‘you must not kill’. Now if you commit murder, you do not have to commit adultery as well to become a breaker of the law” (James 2:8-11). Later on, he shows how the many virtues and good works which make up the Christian life are all the expression of a right relationship with God and of the true wisdom which comes from him. “The wisdom that comes down from above is essentially something pure; it also makes for peace, and is kindly and considerate; it is full of compassion and shows itself by doing good; nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it” (James 3:17).

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

9. The teaching authority of the Church has continued to guide Christians and apply the commandment of love to concrete situations, always in accordance with the teaching of Christ and

the apostles. Changing times bring new moral problems, and the commandment of love has to be applied to situations which are very different from New Testament times. In these circumstances, the need for authoritative guidance is keenly felt, and this need is met by the pronouncements of the teaching Church.

It should scarcely surprise us that human reason has to be informed and equipped by a source outside itself in order to deal with questions of morality. In other fields of knowledge and human behaviour the individual intellect is generally not in a position to make its own standards or discover its own truth. These usually derive, at least in important matters, from an outside source. Similarly, the individual conscience has often only an obscure view of moral truth. God has indeed inscribed the moral law in the heart of every man, but this does not mean that it is a simple matter for the individual to know it clearly and with certainty, especially in its more detailed application. For this he requires the help of an external guide. The very diversity of moral opinion we see around us, even in matters of fundamental importance, is enough to show what a great need there is for such a guide.

10. There are some who accept the need for external guidance but take the view that we need nothing more than the teaching of Christ himself. This teaching, they say, can be known from Scripture, and therefore we do not need the Church.

It is noticeable, however, that those who speak in this way often concentrate on a particular aspect of Christ's moral teaching, to the neglect of other aspects which are no less important. They may, for example, identify the teaching of Christ with certain features of the Sermon on the Mount, or with the general exhortation to love one's neighbour, without paying enough attention to the specific demands which Christ makes in every area of the moral life.

In reality it makes little sense to call oneself a Christian without accepting the Church. For to be a Christian is to be a

member of Christ, and Christ cannot be separated from his body, the Church. In uniting us to himself by Baptism, Christ also unites us to one another in the community of the Church. "By one Spirit", says St. Paul, "we were all baptised into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13); and now we are "the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). The Second Vatican Council therefore teaches that Christ himself

in explicit terms affirmed the necessity of faith and Baptism (cf. Mk. 16:16, Jn. 3:5), and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through Baptism as through a door men enter the Church (*Constitution on the Church*, par.14).

And elsewhere the Council states:

Baptism therefore establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it. But of itself Baptism is only a beginning, an inauguration wholly directed towards the fullness of life in Christ. Baptism, therefore, envisages a complete profession of faith, complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ willed it to be, and finally complete ingrafting in eucharistic communion (*Decree on Ecumenism*, par.22).

Nor should it surprise us that the gift of salvation is something we receive in communion with others and with their assistance. In the religious, as in other spheres, "no man is an island". Grace, we are accustomed to say, presupposes nature and builds on it; and so our natural need for community finds expression in the Church on a new and higher level. To be a disciple of Christ, therefore, means to belong to the Church and to put ourselves under its guidance.

The need for the Church is a constant theme of Christian writers in every age. Let us simply note here two classical statements from early Christian authors. St. Irenaeus, the great second-century bishop and celebrated Doctor of the

Church, has this to say: "Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace. The Spirit is truth" (*Adv. Haer.* 3,24,1). Essentially the same thought is expressed by St. Cyprian, third-century bishop of Carthage, when he says, in a simple but eloquent image: "He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his Mother" (*On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, 6).

11. The Spirit of God is active in the Church as a whole. In many different ways the individual Christian depends on the entire community to help him believe and live in a manner worthy of his Christian calling. But it is the Church's Magisterium, or authoritative teaching office, that has the duty of officially interpreting for the Christian community the teaching of the Gospel, including its moral demands. This teaching authority resides in the episcopal College, united around its Head, the Bishop of Rome, and is inherited from the College of apostles.

It was Christ himself who gave this authority to the apostles. It is a sharing in the heavenly authority he received from his Father. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

It was on the strength of this commission that the apostles presided over and ruled the primitive Christian community, and were accepted by the latter as authoritative teachers of Christ's doctrine. The apostles in turn appointed others to share in their teaching office, imposing hands on them as a sign of the authority given them, and entrusting them with the care of the churches they had founded. Thus St. Paul, in his solemn farewell message to the leaders of the Church at Ephesus, exhorts them to exercise vigilance in the office they have received. "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of

the Lord which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). In the same vein he repeatedly urges his chosen fellow-workers Titus and Timothy, to whom he had entrusted the care of the Churches of Crete and Ephesus, never to tire in the work of teaching Christ’s doctrine and to keep it always safe from corruption.

The teaching authority of Christ, therefore, is still present in the Church. He wants his disciples to be guided by the Church’s teaching. Because the teaching office of the apostles has, by his will, been handed on to the episcopal College, the words spoken by Christ to the Twelve still apply today: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). It is impossible, therefore, to separate allegiance to Christ from obedience to the teaching Church. One cannot be his disciple while disregarding those to whom he has given a share in proclaiming and teaching his Gospel.

CONSCIENCE, THE HOLY SPIRIT AND CHURCH TEACHING

12. The function of conscience is to enable us to discern human moral values and respond to them freely. To the extent that we succeed in doing so, our conscience may be said to be adult, or mature. To help it reach this maturity, the Christian conscience enjoys the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

By our Baptism, the Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts. The grace of the Spirit helps us to recognize the demands of love of God and love of neighbour. In this way the Spirit guides our conscience, so that we do not have to rely simply on our own

unaided reason in our search for what is right.

The Spirit also helps us in our efforts to *obey* our conscience, to do what is right once we have discerned it. He draws our wills to choose the good, and gives us the power to overcome the difficulties that stand in our way. And this again is a help to conscience, since we have less difficulty in seeing the right course of conduct when our will no longer resists it or draws us away from it.

13. In view of this precious gift of the Spirit and the guidance it gives, one might well wonder if conscience stands in need of any further assistance, indeed if any further assistance is possible. The powerful influence of the Spirit within the heart of the individual may seem to make any further help superfluous. Nevertheless, we have only to look around us to see that the contrary is true. Even among Christians there are conflicting views on moral issues, often quite important ones.

The fact is — and each one can confirm this from his or her own experience — that it is not always a simple matter to recognize the authentic voice of the Spirit in our hearts as it points out the right and reasonable path. For it is often obscured by other voices, the voices of our own bias or prejudice, of our self-interest or passion. To distinguish it from these competing voices can at times be extremely difficult.

The apostles themselves did not simply depend upon the inner light of the Spirit for their understanding of Christ's Gospel. They also had the benefit of Christ's personal teaching, and the memory of his words remained always with them. And this, as we have seen, was the arrangement which Christ wished to hold good after he had returned to the Father. In addition to the inner activity of the Spirit, his disciples through the ages were also to have the benefit of authorized teachers. The interior voice of the Spirit was to be assisted, clarified and confirmed by external instruction, by a clearly intelligible word from outside.

14. By the will of Christ, therefore, the Spirit speaking in the

depths of the Christian conscience is complemented by the living voice of the Church's Magisterium. The same moral values which conscience seeks to discern with the help of the Spirit are inculcated by the Church as it sets forth and applies the moral teaching of Christ. And this teaching of the Church, too, is guided and directed by the Spirit. This is so because Christ promised the Spirit to the apostles to lead them into all truth and to abide with them forever (John 14:16,26). Because of this promise the Spirit continually enlightens and assists the Magisterium of the Church, so that it may faithfully teach the Gospel of Christ.

15. There is, then, a remarkable unity and harmony in the arrangement God has made to enable the Christian to discover the way of right conduct. Conscience is the individual's first guide in moral matters and, in a very important sense, it is also his last, for in the end one must do what conscience commands. However, because of the difficulty conscience often experiences in discovering the truth, Christ is at hand to teach and guide it. This he does on the one hand by an outward word, a word which, by the guidance of the Spirit, was first written down in Scripture and is now proclaimed and applied by the teaching Church. On the other hand, again by the guidance of the Spirit, Christ acts on the mind and heart of the individual to help him discern what is right and good. But though Christ's assistance to conscience takes these different forms, each supports and complements the other. The outward word makes it possible for the inner voice of the Spirit to be heard more clearly. On the other hand, the interior activity of the Spirit prepares the way for the voice which comes from outside, so that it receives a more attentive hearing and a more ready and generous response.

CONSCIENCE AND FREEDOM

16. Here a brief reference may be made to a point of view that is sometimes expressed in this context. What has just been said should, we believe, be enough to show that it is based on a misunderstanding.

Authoritative teaching, in the view to which we refer, is seen as a hindrance to true liberty of conscience. To be truly adult, it is maintained, one's conscience must be formed exclusively from one's own insights, without reference to the authoritative teaching of the Church.

Now it is certainly true that one must always do one's best to understand the reasons which justify the particular line of conduct one chooses to follow. The more one succeeds in doing this, the more fully human and reasonable one's conduct is. Today more than ever the world needs people who have learned to exercise their own judgment as they search out, day by day, the path of true and right behaviour.

Still, it is not always possible to grasp fully the inner reasons which recommend a particular choice as the right one. In such circumstances it is altogether in accordance with reason, as well as with the social nature of man, and his dependence in so many ways on others, to follow authoritative guidance. As we have recalled, it is precisely because conscience is so fallible in its insight into moral truth that such guidance has been provided by Christ. To expect to get along on one's own in moral matters, independently of all authority, is in fact to run away from reality. It is a sign, not of maturity, but of immaturity.

Adult or mature Christians, therefore, will welcome the authoritative teaching of the Church as a reliable signpost to moral values and an aid to genuine human development. Enlightened and assisted by it, they take responsibility before God for their moral decisions. They continually search out the

path along which their eternal destiny is calling them. Step by step this path is made known to them, as they faithfully respond to the love of God and to all authentic human values.

17. In making this response the individual must always be ready to meet new demands. The full challenge of the moral law for the individual cannot be spelt out by authority or expressed to the last detail in any series of commandments. It is for conscience to consider each new situation in the light of the overall command of love and the relevant moral values, and make the appropriate response. This response must always be in accordance with the specific commandments of God, as authoritatively interpreted by the Church, and must never violate the prohibitions contained in them. But while this marks out the limit below which our moral response must not fall, we never reach the point at which we can say that we have completely fulfilled the moral law in a given area and have no higher demands to meet.

18. It is along the path we have described that true freedom lies for the human person. Only by following this path can man hope to escape the sway of the many forces which would dominate and enslave him. It is to help free us from the power of such forces that Christ gave the Church authority to teach in his name. Even when the Church gives clear commands on moral issues, it is doing no more than stating clearly what the moral law itself imposes as a duty. It is pointing the way, securely and firmly, to those human moral values, the choice of which is the key to personal growth and fulfilment. It is, in other words, indicating the way to freedom and calling upon us to make a fitting response, a response which is itself free and willing and generous.

It is precisely the dignity of conscience that it is able to make this free response. And it is the special blessing of the teaching of Christ, and of his guiding Spirit, to make available to conscience the light and strength by which to exercise this liberty of choice

and continually develop it.

19. The Second Vatican Council gave great prominence to this precious gift of freedom given us by God. In particular it stressed the essential link between it and the activity of conscience. Nowhere is the dignity of conscience more evident, according to the teaching of the Council, than in this capacity it has to choose the good freely and for its own sake:

It is only in freedom that man can turn himself towards what is good that which is truly freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in man. For God willed that man should "be left in the hand of his own counsel" (Eccl. 15:14), so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him. Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscience and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint (*The Church in the Modern World*, par.17).

Elsewhere the Council speaks of

lovers of true freedom — people, in other words, who will come to decisions on their own judgment and in the light of truth, govern their activities with a sense of responsibility, and strive after what is true and right (*Declaration on Religious Liberty*, par.8).

Through this intelligent and responsible choice of moral values, and of God himself whose will for man is expressed through them, a person attains to maturity of conscience. He gradually arrives at that true liberty which consists in loving the truth and doing it (cf. John 8:32). This is the liberty of the sons of God, which is made possible by the grace of the Holy Spirit. For we "have been called to freedom" (Gal. 5:13), and "for freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). It is to help us reach this

freedom that Christ has given us “the perfect law, the law of liberty” (James 1:25).

CONSCIENCE AND AUTHORITY

20. No one has written with greater sensitivity and insight on the subject of conscience than John Henry Newman. Both in his life and in his writings he was continually aware of the voice of conscience and of the light it sheds on human actions. As a young man during the delirium of a near-fatal illness, he kept repeating, “I have not sinned against the light”. He returned to the subject many times: in his poem, *Lead Kindly Light*, in his great philosophical essay, *A Grammar of Assent*, and in his last major writing, *A Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*.

This last-named work acknowledges the need for the teaching Church as a guide to conscience:

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 biassed 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.

Newman even goes so far as to say that the existence of an external authority is the characteristic mark of revealed religion:

As the essence of all religion is authority and

obedience, so the distinction between natural religion and revealed lies in this, that one has a subjective authority, and the other an objective The supremacy of conscience is the essence of natural religion; the supremacy of Apostle, or Pope, or Church, or Bishop, is the essence of revealed; and when such external authority is taken away, the mind falls back again of necessity on that inward guide which it possessed even before revelation was vouchsafed (*Essay on the Development of Doctrine*).

While Newman here sets definite limits to the supremacy of conscience, he does not mean that we are in any circumstances entitled to disregard it. "It may be objected, indeed," he writes, "that conscience is not infallible; it is true, but still it is ever to be obeyed". In drawing attention to the limitations of conscience Newman simply means that it has no choice but to look for assistance to an authority distinct from itself.

21. While conscience must be guided by Church authority, conflict between the two is nevertheless possible. This possibility, which is much discussed today, is often misunderstood. It is considered by Newman in a celebrated passage. Should the case arise, he says, where one feels unable in conscience to obey a directive of the Pope, obedience to one's conscience certainly comes first. But the decision to go against the Pope's authority can only be taken for the gravest reasons:

Obedience to the Pope, he writes, 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 by disobeying it (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*).

The type of case Newman has in mind is where the Pope gives an injunction or precept in some matter of conduct to a member of the Church. But what he has to say applies with even greater force to the person who appeals to conscience against a declaration by the Pope on what the moral law requires in a particular matter. This is all the more true if (as happened, for example, with the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI, from which many claimed the right to dissent) the Pope, after long consideration, speaks formally and deliberately to settle a matter of public controversy in the Church, and in doing so confirms a doctrine traditionally held. Even a person with the necessary theological competence to judge such an issue, before claiming the right to dissent, would still have to ask himself whether his personal judgment, however reliable and well-founded he believed it to be, could possibly take precedence over such a decision of the Pope. For it is the Pope's divinely appointed task to give direction to the Church in these matters, and in so doing he is assured of the special assistance of the Spirit of Christ.

22. In practice, of course, those who dissent from authoritative Church teaching very often give as their reason for doing so, not so much their own personal insights, as the authority of dissenting theologians. This, however, is to misunderstand the role of theologians in the Church, for their authority does not, and cannot, outweigh the authority of the Pope in declaring the faith of the Church.

The true Catholic position on this question has been stated once again by our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. His words are simple and clear and go to the heart of the matter:

How could there be authentic evangelising if there were no ready and sincere reverence for the Sacred

Magisterium, in clear awareness that by submitting to it the people of God are not accepting the word of men but the true word of God? (*Address to the Bishops of Latin America, 28 January, 1979*).

Again, during his recent visit to our own country, the Pope said:

This theological learning, here as elsewhere throughout the Church, is a reflection on faith, a reflection in faith. A theology which did not deepen faith and lead to prayer might be a discourse on words about God; it could not be a discourse about God, the living God, the God who *is* and whose being is *Love*. It follows that theology can only be authentic in the Church, the community of faith. Only when the teaching of theologians is in conformity with the teaching of the college of Bishops, united with the Pope, can the people of God know with certitude that that teaching is "the faith which has been once and for all entrusted to the Saints" (*Jude 3*). This is not a limitation for theologians, but a liberation; for it preserves them from subservience to changing fashions and binds them securely to the unchanging truth of Christ, the truth which makes us free (John 7:32) (*Address to Priests, Missionaries, Religious Brothers and Sisters, Seminarists, Maynooth, 1 October, 1979*).

Neglect of this truth has done much damage to the Church in recent years. We earnestly request those who have failed to act on it to reconsider their position. We call earnestly on those who write or speak against it to reflect on the great responsibility they incur by influencing the People of God to think and act contrary to the Church's teaching.

WHEN CONSCIENCE ERRS

23. We have referred a number of times already to the fallibility of conscience. Conscience can err, and in fact it often does. Anyone who acts wrongly because of a mistaken conscience deserves sympathy and understanding. As we have already noted in passing, if the conscience is genuinely mistaken, such a person is in fact innocent of any sin.

Nevertheless it often happens that one's conscience may be impaired through one's own fault. Habitual sin in the past, neglect of prayer, unwillingness to examine one's own motivation, refusal to seek the advice of others or to be guided by the competent teaching authority, are some of the factors which cloud the conscience without freeing it from guilt. Sometimes, too, we can be affected in our judgment by self-interest, prejudice, passion or by the difficulty of weighing correctly all the factors involved. Such factors may weaken the will or cloud the intellect and at times they may lessen or even take away completely the guilt of sin, while not, of course, transforming an action which is in itself evil into a good one.

CONSCIENCE IS SACRED

24. We have described the role of conscience as one of discerning the real moral values in the various situations of human life. Since these values manifest God's will for man, our response to them is not merely a moral but also a religious one. In choosing what is morally good, we are acting in accordance with the law of conduct which God has inscribed in our hearts. As the

Second Vatican Council says:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. This voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that, for man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths (*The Church in the Modern World*, par.16).

Here it is appropriate to quote again Cardinal Newman, so many echoes of whose teaching we hear in the doctrine of the Council:

Conscience does not repose on itself, but vaguely reaches forward to something beyond self, and dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions, as is evidenced in that keen sense of obligation and responsibility which informs them. And hence it is that we are accustomed to speak of conscience as a voice and moreover a voice or the echo of a voice, imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience (*Grammar of Assent*).

It is for this reason that conscience is sacred. Even when it is mistaken, it is still the expression of man's obedience to God, provided it has sincerely followed the light given it.

25. Sometimes, however, appeal is made to conscience without any regard for its dependence on God. People speak of the supremacy of conscience and its rights when what they really have in mind is its supposed independence of all authority, including the authority of God. Once again we should listen to the words of Newman, as he describes this utterly false idea of

the rights of conscience. What he has to say about the notion of conscience in the popular mind in his own day applies with no less force to certain sections of opinion in the world of today.

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 Law-giver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*).

To reject this interpretation of the rights of conscience is, of course, in no sense to call in question the existence of these rights and our sacred duty to respect them. One of the great contributions of the Second Vatican Council was in fact to proclaim these rights and clarify their meaning. Everyone, the Council teaches, is entitled to freedom from coercion or constraint in following his or her conscience. And while, in the exercise of this right, there must be respect for the rights of others and for the requirements of "public order" in general, the Council sees the right itself as securely grounded in human freedom and responsibility, and, as such, an inalienable possession of each individual person (cf. *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, par.2-7). This doctrine of the rights of conscience is clearly very different from the false notion which Newman so forcibly condemns.

GOOD INTENTIONS NOT A SUFFICIENT TEST OF MORALITY

26. What we have been saying about the Catholic position on conscience can be briefly summed up in this way. There is an objective moral order, an order of human values existing independently of our opinions and judgments, according to which some actions are right and others wrong. This moral order is known to us through our reason, through the teaching of the Scriptures, and through the authoritative declarations of the Church. Conscience is the judgment whereby we decide that a given act of ours is in accordance with the moral order or not. If our conscience is mistaken, we do not sin by following it, but an evil action remains evil, even if we sincerely believe it to be good.

27. Some recent writers have shown a tendency to distort the organic and living relationship linking the moral order, authority and conscience. In their concern to emphasize the duty of following one's conscience, they have under-emphasized the objectivity of the moral order and the authority of the teaching Church which interprets and declares it. They have exaggerated the freedom of the individual in the face of general moral precepts, conveying the impression, intentionally or unintentionally, that certain actions that have always been regarded as sinful are not necessarily so in all circumstances, but may be good when performed with the right intention or with a good motive.

28. This kind of reasoning is applied in various areas of morality. In the context of the fifth commandment, for example, it has been asserted that it can sometimes be lawful deliberately and directly to take innocent human life. Abortion is thus justified in certain circumstances, or euthanasia, or the direct killing of innocent civilians by military action. It is argued that cases

sometimes arise where the evil involved in such acts is outweighed by the good achieved through them, and that this is sufficient to make them morally permissible or even good. The overall demands of love are held to be better served by doing the action in question than by omitting it.

29. The error of this view is that it fails to take into account that certain types of human activity, no matter what good effects may be expected to follow from them, are always contrary to the true good of the human person. To do such acts is to deny the dignity to which human beings are called as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Even the best motives cannot change the nature of such actions. The end, in other words, can never justify the means: as St. Paul reminds us in the Epistle to the Romans, we may not do evil that good may come (Rom. 3:8).

It is true that the answer to moral questions is not always easy or clear. It is in fact part of the process of the development of conscience that we should have to fight our way through to what seem the best moral decisions in difficult and complex cases. Nevertheless, the Christian who is faithful to the true demands of conscience will never do what is morally evil, even if this seems the only way to achieve some good or avoid some harm.

30. This tendency to justify exceptions to unchanging moral norms is often found too in discussion of sexual morality. It has been suggested that actions which have always been condemned by Christian teaching, such as fornication and adultery, can be lawful and good if done from the motive of love.

This view errs by using the word "love" in what is at best a partial and limited sense. Indeed its real meaning in such contexts is often quite opposed to the genuine love of God and of our neighbour to which the Gospel calls us. This true Christian love is not to be identified with the emotion of the moment, however deeply felt. Neither should it be confused with an overall good intention, in the light of which any action is held to be permissible if, on balance, its total end-result appears good

and desirable. In its full Christian meaning love includes love of God and of his creative design. Actions contrary to this design can never be a fitting response to God by the human person.

Among the specific actions which are condoned in certain circumstances in some writings are pre-marital and extra-marital sexual intercourse, masturbation, homosexual acts, contraceptive intercourse in marriage. Those who write in this way differ in their assessment of the reasons or motives that justify such acts, but are agreed in holding that they may sometimes be lawful. Appeal to the authority of conscience, or to what love is considered to require, is here used to justify exceptions to moral laws that are universally binding.

These views are contrary to the clear teaching of the Catholic Church. According to this teaching, which has been reaffirmed in recent documents of the Holy See (*Humanae Vitae*, 1968; *Persona Humana: Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics*, 1975: cf. *Sterilization in Catholic Hospitals*, 1975), all of these actions are in themselves morally evil and no motives or circumstances can change their nature.

31. In other spheres, too, attempts are sometimes made to justify immoral behaviour along the lines referred to above. That is to say, some important good to be achieved is held to justify what is in reality an evil action. Torture, for example, or the denial of genuine human rights to prisoners or to particular sections of the population, is often defended on such grounds. In other cases people simply allow their own selfish interests or desires to persuade them that what they are doing is not really wrong. They neglect or put at the back of their minds the teaching of Christ and the Church about justice, truth, honesty, fair dealing etc., and substitute for it opinions and interpretations of their own.

To the extent that people who act in these ways seek to justify their conduct, rather than frankly recognizing it as wrong, they

are making a false appeal to conscience. Conscience has become for them a more or less independent judge of morality, an arbitrary rule of conduct. It is no longer firmly anchored to the real order of human values, but is tossed about according to the changing requirements of personal or group advantage.

It is unnecessary for us to spell out the danger involved in such attitudes. They imperil not only the moral development of the individual but the welfare of society as a whole. In the area of justice, particularly, the great need to uphold objective standards and develop better-informed and more sensitive consciences becomes increasingly evident every day. We dealt at length with this matter in our recent Pastoral Letter, *The Work of Justice*, and we urgently commend what we wrote there for continuing reflection and study.

PARTICULAR ACTS AND BASIC DIRECTION OF LIFE

32. It is sometimes asserted today that individual sinful actions, even when the matter is serious, do not break a person's friendship with God. The essential thing, it is said, is that the general direction of one's life should be good. Provided one is habitually motivated by love of God and is seeking to do his will, individual transgressions need not involve separation from God and the loss of the divine life of grace.

This line of thought starts from the primacy of the love of God in the Christian life, and in this of course it is right. It is right too in placing individual actions in the context of a person's overall relationship with God. But it errs insofar as it suggests that one can continue to love God while refusing to do his will in a serious

matter. An individual action can, in fact, completely alter the direction of one's life, though when this happens it is generally as a result of carelessness about lesser acts, involving a general drift away from God. No doubt the sinfulness of individual actions was sometimes judged in the past in a rather legalistic and superficial way. It remains true, however, that the basic direction of a person's life expresses itself in particular actions. The person who deliberately does what he knows to be contrary to God's will in a serious matter thereby shows that he does not love God. He has in fact turned away from God in self-love and disobedience. In the words of the recent *Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics* of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

According to the Church's teaching, mortal sin, which is opposed to God, does not consist only in formal and direct resistance to the commandment of charity. It is equally to be found in this opposition to authentic love which is included in every deliberate transgression, in serious matter, of each of the moral laws.

HOW FREE ARE OUR MORAL CHOICES?

3. We have referred above to the dignity of a free and enlightened conscience. It is rightly stressed today that moral behaviour, to be worthy of man and his vocation to love God, must be truly free. We also realize today how often freedom is impaired. The last hundred years have witnessed extensive research into the hidden springs and motives of our actions. We are more aware

than ever before of the ways in which our attitudes are formed and of the pressures which influence what appear to be our free actions. Some of these pressures act so far below the level of consciousness that we never realize the influence which they have had on our decisions. Psychological investigation and depth analysis have helped to reveal the workings of these hidden influences.

34. Here too, however, exaggerated and one-sided statements must be avoided. Psychological techniques are unable to examine or analyse the act of will by which we make our decisions. Though every decision is surrounded by a complex of conscious and unconscious motives, the decision is still a responsible one and a moral one, unless the weight of these motives is so extreme as to extinguish freedom altogether. It is right that we should show sympathy and understanding towards those who act wrongly because of external or internal pressures which are difficult to resist. The sinfulness of these actions will be diminished in proportion to the strength of the pressures involved. But to suggest that such actions — apart from rare and exceptional cases — are not culpable at all, that they are without moral blame, is to deprive people of their dignity as free and responsible human beings, and to transform them into automata who respond blindly to the strongest pressure.

35. It is necessary to recall the above teaching because of the confusion caused by erroneous views of the kind we have been describing. In the area of sexual morality in particular, young people are being deprived of the firm guidelines which they need in order to understand and come to terms with their awakening sexuality. We cannot ignore recent insights into the development of the adolescent mind, nor would we wish to perpetuate the sense of guilt which oppressed some young people in the past because of actions over which they did not have full control. But it does no service to the young to pretend that such actions are morally indifferent, or even positively virtuous, or that there is

no need for them to learn self-control in the use of their sexual faculties.

WHAT OTHERS DO

¶6. There is also a tendency today to suggest that, because an immoral practice has become widespread, because, as it is said, “everyone does it”, it thereby ceases to be wrong. One hears this idea invoked, for example, in regard to failures in justice: exorbitant profit margins, people helping themselves in shops or factories, exaggerated expense accounts, etc., are often excused on this principle. And yet it takes very little reflection to realize that what people actually do, even in great numbers, can be a very unreliable guide to moral principles. To forget this makes no more sense than, in the sphere of health, for example, to regard the habits of the majority as necessarily the right standard by which to live. It is simply not the case that the individual conscience can abdicate its responsibility by unthinkingly following the practice of others; at all times it is its duty to seek the right course of conduct in the light of rational reflection and with the help of authoritative teaching.

Appeal to majority practice is also very frequently made in an attempt to justify sinful conduct in the domain of sexuality. But, any more than in other areas of morals, what is right and wrong in sexual morality is not changed by how people actually behave. Sexual misconduct remains an offence against human dignity. It is an offence too against Christ, to whom the Christian belongs by Baptism, and who is himself the source of the Christian law of love and of the grace that helps us to fulfil it.

This grace is available in the sacraments, especially Penance

and the Eucharist. Frequent recourse to these sacraments is necessary, together with regular prayer and a constant effort of self-discipline. It is in this way, with the aid of appropriate guidance and counselling, that young people can succeed in being faithful to the true nature and purpose of the God-given gift of sexuality, and grow to full maturity as Christians and as human beings.

CONCLUSION

37. Our purpose in issuing this statement is to deepen the awareness of moral values among our people. These values, which embody God's plan for human beings and are an expression of his wisdom, are reflected through the experience of the Church and its teaching in every age. The more fully we realize them in our lives through obedience to the voice of conscience, the more we become conformed to the image of Christ. It is Christ himself, living by the Spirit in our hearts, and in the Church, which is his Body, who makes known these values to us and invites us to live by them. Through them the demands of the Gospel law of love are presented to us in the concrete circumstances of our life.

In offering these guiding principles on the relationship between conscience and morality, and in referring, however briefly, to the respective roles of love, freedom and authority in the Christian life, our aim is to help Catholics to grow in moral insight and freedom, as they become progressively more responsive to the guidance of an enlightened, sure and sensitive conscience.

We call upon all those who share in the teaching function of the Church, particularly those engaged in educating students for

the priesthood, in the formation of men and women in the religious life, in teaching Catholic morality in schools or colleges, or in preaching the Word of God, to communicate Christian moral values in their fullness and to adhere loyally to the teaching we have recalled. We encourage teachers and parents in their vital work of ensuring that the young are given a moral formation in accordance with these principles. All must make grateful use of recent developments in theological and psychological understanding, but without losing anything of the age-old wisdom of the Church. "Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven", Our Lord tells us, "is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both old and new" (Matt. 13:52).

On behalf of the Hierarchy of Ireland:

- ✠ Tomás Cardinal Ó Fiaich, Archbishop of Armagh
- ✠ Dermot Ryan, Archbishop of Dublin
- ✠ Thomas Morris, Archbishop of Cashel.
- ✠ Joseph Cunnane, Archbishop of Tuam

22 February, 1980,
Feast of the Chair of St. Peter.

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