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CONSCIENCE AND THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

Oswald Cardinal Gracias[♦]

Archbishop of Bombay

Abstract

Christian life is basically a community life rooted and grounded in Christ. Belonging to God's family presupposes the responsibility follow the dictates of our conscience formed according to the law of Christ and the moral teachings of the Church. A responsible use of the conscience brings us closer to God. Hence, one must make sure that one has a well formed and informed conscience that is always in search of the truth. In this task, the Church's moral teaching is essential and to make the Church's teaching one's own is a challenge today. The Christian tradition has considered conscience as a gift of God, as a special way of contact between God and human hearts. It has also held the view that though conscience is fallible, its inviolability has to be respected, and that one has the obligation to follow one's conscience. The dignity and value of the human person depends upon one's conscience. However, conscience is not an autonomous judge, but derives the criteria for judgment from the eternal, objective moral law. That is, there cannot be an absolute freedom of conscience because the human person is the subject of truth. Based on the theological tradition, especially on the theology of Augustine and Aquinas and Newman, and based on the official documents of the Church, the article explains the understanding and importance of conscience in the Magisterium of the Church.

[♦]**Oswald Cardinal Gracias** was ordained a priest in 1970, ordained bishop in 1997 and was appointed Cardinal in 2007. He holds a Doctorate in Canon Law (Urban University, Rome) and a Diploma in Jurisprudence (Gregorian University, Rome). He was Vice Chairman of Vox Clara Committee, Rome. From 2010-2014 he was President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI). In 2011, he was elected President of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). He is also the President of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in India (CCBI). On 13 April 2013, he was appointed to the eight-member Council of Cardinals established by Pope Francis to help with governing the Catholic Church. Email: diocesebombay@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

As Christians, our life in Christ takes on a community dimension, where all of us belong to God's family and have the responsibility to live the faith, to spread the faith and to follow the law of love of God and neighbour according to the dictates of our consciences which have been formed according to the Church's moral teaching. In a particular way, every responsible use of our conscience will help us move closer to God. In this regard, *Dignitatis Humanae* instructs us that in the formation of their consciences,

the faithful must pay careful attention to the holy and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is its duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself. In addition, towards those who are not of the faith, Christians should behave properly, "in the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech" (2 Cor 6: 6-7), and should try, even if it involves shedding their blood, to spread the light of life with all confidence and apostolic courage.¹

Hence, the Church's moral teaching is essential for the formation of one's conscience. And the challenge today is to make the Church's teaching one's own and this "work of appropriation is a task for conscience."²

Conscience, which is an awesome gift of God, is seen as a very special way of contact between God and our human hearts. By conscience we mean the voice of God speaking in our hearts. According to St Augustine, conscience is the place of the loving colloquy between God and man. It is the divine centre of a person where one is addressed by God.³ Thus, even though conscience is fallible, not only must the inviolability of the conscience be respected but also one has the obligation to follow one's conscience.⁴

¹The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 14.

²Germain Grisez, *The Way of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Vol. 1, Ch 23, Qt G, *Christian Moral Principles*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, 566.

³Cf. Anselm Hertz, "Glaube und Gewissen," in *Handbuch der Christlichen Ethik*, vol. 3. Freiburg: Herder, 1982, 52-58.

⁴Kevin O'Neil and Peter Black, *The Essential Moral Handbook. A Guide to Catholic Living*, Missouri: Ligouri, 2006, 84.

In this article on conscience, I will explain the understanding and importance of conscience in the Magisterium of the Church.

2. Conscience and Human Dignity

The dignity and value of the human person depends upon one's conscience. As the Catechism of the Church instructs us:

The dignity of the human person implies and requires *uprightness of moral conscience*. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the *prudent judgment* of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.⁵

If one faithfully obeys one's conscience, it paves the way for leading an authentic life. So, our conscience has dignity and it must be followed when we have the conviction that the decision we are making is a right one. However, in the process of searching for the truth in order to arrive at a decision, one has to form oneself according to the teaching of the Church which is based on the utmost respect for the dignity of every person from womb to tomb. Hence, the task of making a correct judgement is a serious responsibility.

Gaudium et Spes explains this when it says that one's dignity rests in observing the law inscribed by God in one's heart. It is through our conscience that this law of God is made known. By being loyal to our conscience we are

joined to others in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships. So, the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and endeavour to conform to the objective standards of moral conduct.⁶

Hence, each one of us must make sure that before we make moral decisions we have a well formed and informed conscience that is always in search of the truth.

3. Conscience and the Objective Moral Law

Conscience has been traditionally known as the ultimate subjective norm of morality in contrast to the objective moral norm. It is not an autonomous judge of our actions and is not capable of making its

⁵Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1780.

⁶The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

own moral laws. So where does conscience derive its criteria of judgement? It obtains it from the eternal, objective and universal divine law.

The conscience therefore is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-a-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behavior, as from the passage of the Book of Genesis (Cf. Gen 2: 9, 17) ... Precisely in this sense the conscience is the "secret sanctuary" in which "God's voice echoes."⁷

The Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, affirmed that "the highest norm of human life is the divine law itself — eternal, objective and universal, by which God orders, directs and governs the whole world and the ways of the human community according to a plan conceived in his wisdom and love."⁸ It is for this reason that the Council states that the human person, in his or her conscience, is "alone with God."⁹ With the assistance of divine providence, the human person is able to share in this divine law and be able to arrive at a deep knowledge of the truth. Thus, it is not conscience that freely establishes what is right and wrong. Conscience is an instrument for detecting moral truth. It detects moral truth; it interprets a norm which it does not create.¹⁰

However, the search for truth should be undertaken in a way that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person, namely, through proper teaching, effective communication and respectful dialogue. It is important to state that it is through one's conscience that the human person is able to recognize the demands of the divine law.¹¹ And "the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and endeavour to conform to the objective standards of moral conduct,"¹² namely, the objective norms of morality. Thus, the image of conscience in *Gaudium et Spes*

⁷St Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 43.

⁸The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.

⁹The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

¹⁰St Pope John Paul II, Address to Bishops of U.S.A. on the occasion of their *ad limina* visit, 15 October 1988, Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. English, 24 October 1988, 23.

¹¹The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.

¹²The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16. "Quo magis ergo conscientia recta praevallet, eo magis personae et coetus a caeco arbitrio recedunt et normis objectivis moralitatis conformari satagunt."

as the voice of the moral law clearly tells us that conscience must be in harmony with a specific moral law which calls us to love and to do what is good and avoid what is evil. In other words, conscience is not an independent faculty to decide what is good and what is evil. It must act in conformity with the objective norms of morality given to us by God, or it is in error. In his Regina Coeli message St Pope John Paul II affirmed: "... we defend human conscience. We defend the rectitude of human conscience, so that it will call good good and evil evil, so that it will live in truth, so that man will live in truth, so that society will live in truth."¹³ In this regard, it is important to emphasize that conscience is always subordinate to the moral truth. It is conscience that urges us to know the truth. Conscience has the inalienable right to the truth and is intimately linked to human dignity. The human conscience goes astray if it is deprived of the truth. Each one of us is then called to do our best to submit our wills to the truth.¹⁴ With God's abiding grace, conscience can lead us on a spiritual journey that points to the Christ, the fullness of truth and his Church.¹⁵

4. Conscience and Freedom

Dignitatis Humanae instructs us that all of us are bound to follow our conscience faithfully in every sphere of activity in order to come to God, our last end. No one must be forced to act against one's conscience or be prevented from acting according to one's conscience, especially in religious matters.¹⁶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also states that each one of us has "the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions."¹⁷ In January 2002, in his World Day of Peace Address, St Pope John Paul II clearly explained:

Respect for a person's conscience, where the image of God himself is reflected (cf. Gen 1:26-27), means that we can only propose the truth to others, who are then responsible for accepting it. To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offense against human dignity, and ultimately an offense against God whose image that person bears.

¹³St Pope John Paul II, "Regina Coeli Message," 10 May 1981.

¹⁴St Pope John Paul II, "Address to the Bishops of Austria," 24 June 1988, cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. English, 5 September 1988, 5.

¹⁵Richard Spinello, "Pope John Paul II on Conscience," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 109, 11 (01 August 2009).

¹⁶The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.

¹⁷*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1782.

The principle of respecting one's conscience is a fundamental right that is guaranteed by constitutions and international agreements. "To do violence to conscience is to seriously harm the person. It is the most painful blow inflicted to human dignity. It is, in a certain sense, worse than inflicting physical death, worse than killing."¹⁸

But there cannot be an absolute freedom of conscience because the human person is the subject of truth. Hence, we should let ourselves be guided by the truth; but truth is not made by us humans. We can "only discover truth in the nature that is given to us along with our existence. It is God who, as Creator, calls reality into being and, as revealer shows it forth ever more fully in Jesus Christ and in his Church."¹⁹ As Christians, we are called to direct our freedom towards becoming one with God. Hence, the freedom to act in conscience does not mean a licence to do whatever we wish to do but rather what we ought to do because it is the right thing to do.²⁰

5. Conscience: Valuable Insights from Bl. John Henry Newman

No study on conscience would be complete without reference to Cardinal John Henry Newman, the outstanding defender of the rights of conscience. He is known by many as Doctor conscientiae — a great teacher of conscience. His statements about conscience are among the most beautiful and appropriate texts which he left to us. He faithfully upheld the mutual interaction of conscience and Church teaching. He forcefully stated: "Conscience has rights because it has duties."²¹

Newman was convinced that in our conscience we hear the echo of God's voice. He saw conscience as the way to recognize the living God. He had a firm conviction that obedience to conscience prepares one's heart for faith in the revelation of God, which in turn purifies and enlightens conscience. 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

¹⁸St Pope John Paul II, Angelus Message, 10 January 1982, cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. English, 18 January 1982, 3. "Violentare le coscienze è un grave danno fatto all'uomo. È il più doloroso colpo inferto alla dignità umana. È, in un certo senso, peggiore dell'infliggere la morte fisica, dell'uccidere."

¹⁹Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. English, 17 December 1979, 8.

²⁰Richard M Gula, "The Moral Conscience," in *Conscience*, ed. Charles Curran, *Readings in Moral Theology*, no. 14, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004, 53.

²¹St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 34. See *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk: Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, Uniform Edition: Longman, Green and Company, London, 1868-1881, vol. 2, 250.

same.²² Newman became a convert as a man of conscience. It was his conscience that led him out of the old ties into the world of Catholicism. According to him, the existence of an external authority is the hallmark of revealed religion. He said that since the essence of all religion is authority and obedience, the distinction between natural religion and revealed religion is that one has subjective authority and the other has objective authority. The supremacy of conscience is the essence of natural religion whilst the supremacy of the Apostle or Pope or Church or Bishop is the essence of revealed religion.²³

Newman based the dignity and the obligatory nature of conscience on the truth: "that there is a truth; then; that there is one truth... that the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound not to descant upon it, but to venerate it."²⁴ It was because Newman followed the "kindly light" of truth, it led him to become a Catholic in the year 1845. Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI summarized Newman's understanding of conscience in these words: "Conscience is both capacity for truth and obedience to the truth which manifests itself to anyone who seeks it with an open heart."²⁵ Newman 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.²⁶

6. *Veritatis Splendor* and the Crucial Role of Conscience

The understanding of conscience in *Veritatis Splendor* is in conformity with the Catholic tradition on conscience. The Encyclical states that "conscience is a *practical judgment*, a judgment which makes known what man must do or not do, or which assesses an act already performed by him. It is a judgment which applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do

²²Hermann Geissler, *Conscience and Truth in the Writings of Blessed John Henry Newman*, Rome: International Centre of Newman Friends, 2011.

²³John Henry Newman, *An Essay on The Development of Christian Doctrine*, Section I, No. 1, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1900, 357.

²⁴John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Section II, No. 11, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1900, 86.

²⁵Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia on the occasion of Christmas Greetings, Sala Regia, December 20, 2010, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20101220_curia-auguri.html. See also Stephanie Mann, "How can we hear the voice of God? Blessed John Henry Newman and Conscience," *Our Sunday Visitor*, Huntington, IN, 12 October 2013.

²⁶Hermann Geissler, *Conscience and Truth in the Writings of Blessed John Henry Newman*, Rome: International Centre of Newman Friends, 2011, 15.

good and avoid evil.”²⁷ St Pope John Paul II makes an important observation when he states that conscience, as the judgment of an act, is not exempt from the possibility of error. As the Vatican Council instructs us that often “conscience can be mistaken as a result of invincible ignorance, although it does not on that account forfeit its dignity; but this cannot be said when a man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin.”²⁸ Thus, we need to be aware that one’s conscience can err and hence it needs to be formed with the doctrine of the Church.

Veritatis Splendor explains that conscience is the link between human freedom and moral truth. It insists that “submitting to the Magisterium is not an abandonment of freedom but the recognition of freedom within the truth.”²⁹ Further, the relationship between human person’s freedom and God’s law is “most deeply lived out in the ‘heart’ of the person, in his moral conscience.”³⁰ St Pope John Paul II asserts that

in order to have a “good conscience” (1 *Tim* 1:5), one must seek the truth and must make judgments in accordance with that same truth. As the Apostle Paul says, the conscience must be “confirmed by the Holy Spirit” (cf. *Rom* 9:1); it must be “clear” (2 *Tim* 1:3); it must not “practise cunning and tamper with God’s word,” but “openly state the truth” (cf. 2 *Cor* 4:2).³¹

St Augustine wrote: “This is our freedom: submit to the truth.”³² “We must always look for the truth, venerate the truth discovered and obey the truth. There is no joy beyond this search, this veneration and obedience.”³³ “The Church puts herself always and only at the service of conscience... helping it not to swerve from the truth about

²⁷St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 59.

²⁸The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

²⁹Jayne Hoose, “Conscience in *Veritatis Splendor* and the Catechism,” in *Conscience*, ed. Charles Curran, *Readings in Moral Theology*, no. 14, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004, 90.

³⁰St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 54.

³¹St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 62.

³²S. Augustini, *De Free Will*, 2, 13, 37.

³³St. Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Participants of the Second International Congress on Moral Theology,” 12 November 1988. Cf. *L’Osservatore Romano*, ed. English, 19-26 December 1988, 7. St Augustine wrote: “Questa è la nostra libertà: sottometterci alla verità” (S. Agostino, “De Libero Arbitrio,” 2, 13, 37). “Cercate sempre la verità: venerate la verità scoperta; ubbidite alla verità. Non c’è gioia al di fuori di questa ricerca, di questa venerazione, di questa ubbidienza.”

the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to obtain the truth with certainty and to abide in it."³⁴

St Pope John Paul II goes on to state that "it is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives. In the case of the correct conscience, it is a question of the *objective truth* received by man; in the case of the erroneous conscience, it is a question of what man, mistakenly, *subjectively* considers to be true."³⁵ Quoting St Thomas Aquinas he stated that one must

never confuse a "subjective" error about moral good with the "objective" truth rationally proposed to man in virtue of his end, or to make the moral value of an act performed with a true and correct conscience equivalent to the moral value of an act performed by following the judgment of an erroneous conscience.³⁶

Dignitatis Humanae affirms that "the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ, the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself."³⁷

7. The Binding Force of Conscience

In his encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, Pope Pius XII stated that the voice of conscience teaches even the uneducated and those who do not have the cultural values of humankind, "what is good and what is bad, what lawful, what forbidden, and makes people feel themselves responsible for their actions to a Supreme Judge."³⁸ Hence, one's responsibility before God, depends on one's conscience. Saint Bonaventure teaches us that "conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force."³⁹ Years ago Karl Rahner, SJ wrote an article entitled "An Appeal to Conscience" in which he stated that one's conscience is the most immediate giver of moral norms and so it must be followed even when in error. The binding force of conscience, even mistaken

³⁴St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 64.

³⁵St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 63.

³⁶Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 17, a. 4. Also, St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 63.

³⁷The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 14.

³⁸Pope Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, no. 28.

³⁹In *Il Librum Sentent.*, dist. 39, a. 1, q. 3, conclusion; Ed. *Ad Claras Aquas*, II 907b. See also, St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 58.

conscience, comes from the person's belief that the conscientious decision that is made is in accord with the law of God.⁴⁰ Thus, conscience is *the witness of God himself*, whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of our souls, calling us *fortiter et suaviter* (strongly and sweetly) to obey.⁴¹ "Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this, and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience: in being the place, the sacred place where God speaks to man."⁴² As a consequence, if we do not listen to our own conscience, if we allow error to creep into it, we break the intimate bond that unites us in an alliance with our Creator.⁴³ Pope Francis stated that we must learn to listen more to our conscience. However, he cautioned that this does not mean that we ought to follow our ego, do whatever interests us, whatever suits us, whatever pleases us. That is not conscience. The Pope added that "conscience is the interior place for listening to the truth, to goodness, for listening to God; it is the inner place of my relationship with him, the One who speaks to my heart and helps me to discern, to understand the way I must take and, once the decision is made, to go forward, to stay faithful."⁴⁴

Thus, following one's conscience implies that one has the duty to do everything possible to conform one's conscience to the objective moral law, to inform oneself and let oneself be taught and willing to accept instruction from the word of God and the Magisterium of the Church.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1-2, 19.5. See also the Commentary *In Epistolam ad Romanos*, c.14 lect. 2 (ad v.5).

⁴¹St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 58.

⁴²St Pope John Paul II, "Address" (General Audience, August 17, 1983), 2, *Insegnamenti*, VI, 2 (1983), 256: La coscienza morale non chiude l'uomo dentro una invalicabile e impenetrabile solitudine, ma lo apre alla chiamata, alla voce di Dio. In questo, non in altro, sta tutto il mistero e la dignità della coscienza morale: nell'essere cioè il luogo, lo spazio santo nel quale Dio parla all'uomo.

⁴³St Pope John Paul II, "Address" (General Audience, August 17, 1983), 2, 256: Di conseguenza, se l'uomo non ascolta la propria coscienza, se consente che in essa prenda dimora l'errore, egli spezza il vincolo più profondo che lo stringe in alleanza con il suo Creatore.

⁴⁴Pope Francis, Angelus, St Peter's Square, 30 June 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130630.html.

⁴⁵Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1963, 50.

8. Practical Ways to Inform One's Conscience

The Vatican Council states that

the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This Magisterium is not superior to the word of God, but it is rather its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it.⁴⁶

The Church, in her life and teaching, is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), including the truth about our moral actions. Thus “the Church has the right always and everywhere to proclaim moral principles, even in respect of the social order, and to make judgments about any human matter in so far as this is required by fundamental human rights or the salvation of souls.”⁴⁷ In this regard, one of the most essential ways to inform one's conscience is by doing an in-depth study of the teaching of the Church. St Pope John Paul II noted that when the Church proclaims the doctrine of the faith and morals, she is providing an essential service to our own human dignity because from the very beginning God created us in his own image and likeness. He added that only a correctly formed conscience rightly corresponds to human dignity, namely, a conscience that is oriented towards the truth and is illuminated by it. Therefore, the very dignity of our humanity requires that we orient our conscience in accordance with the order established by the Creator.⁴⁸ Richard Gula explained this well when he stated that conscience is neither a law unto itself, nor a teacher of moral doctrine. “To invoke conscience means to be subject to moral truth and to make a practical judgment of what to do in the light of that truth.”⁴⁹

One's conscience becomes clear when one approaches the mystery of God and his truth. The proper formation of conscience includes the disposition of being open to the word of God and acting on it, the conviction of being a member of the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and the profound desire to live the Christian life in accordance with God's commands. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instructs us that “the Word of God is a light for our path. We

⁴⁶The Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 10.

⁴⁷St Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 27.

⁴⁸St Pope John Paul II, Address to the Bishops of Austria, 24 June 1988, cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. English, 5 September 1988, 5.

⁴⁹Richard M Gula, “The Moral Conscience,” 53.

must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. This is how moral conscience is formed.”⁵⁰

Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI stated in *Deus Caritas Est*,

The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest... The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.⁵¹

9. Conclusion

As a Church, we have an important responsibility of being the moral conscience of society. “Ecclesial life which should be exclusively based on the truths of the faith, must remain faithful to Christ and the Gospel message if we wish to help those members of the Church who find themselves in a society that seeks to relativize and secularize all areas of life.”⁵² St Augustine powerfully stated “If you believe what you like in the gospels, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.”

The Church encourages well-formed consciences not only by teaching moral truth but also by encouraging its members to develop the virtue of prudence.⁵³ Prudence helps us “to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.”⁵⁴ Thus, a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to

⁵⁰*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1802.

⁵¹Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28.

⁵²See Herminio Rico, SJ, *John Paul II and the Legacy of Dignitatis Humanae*, (reference to Pope John Paul II, 22 June 1996), Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2002, Footnote: 190: “La vita ecclesiale, che deve fondarsi esclusivamente sulle verità della fede, deve rimanere fedele a Cristo e al messaggio del Vangelo, se vogliamo aiutare quei membri della Chiesa, che si trovano in una società che cerca di relativizzare e secolarizzare tutti gli ambiti della vita.” (In German: “Kirchliches Leben, das sich ausschließlich auf den Wahrheiten des Glaubens zu gründen hat, muß Christus und der Botschaft des Evangeliums treu bleiben, wenn wir den Gliedern der Kirche helfen wollen, die sich in einer Gesellschaft befinden, die alle Lebensbereiche zu relativieren und zu säkularisieren versucht”). Message of St Pope John Paul II at the meeting with members of the German Bishops Conference at Collegium Leoninum in Paderborn, Germany, Saturday, 22 June 1996.

⁵³USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship. A Call to Political Responsibility*, November 2007, no. 19.

⁵⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806.

choose or vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. "The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good."⁵⁵

St John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* clearly states that absolute moral norms are required for the good functioning of society. All the faithful are to be encouraged to form their consciences according to the teachings of the Church. Without an accurate understanding of Christian conscience it can never be reliably at the service of the culture of life and love or of the growth of individuals in holiness.⁵⁶ Bishops' Conferences should suggest various ways to enlighten peoples' conscience and to teach those entrusted to their care.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, 24 November 2002, no. 4.

⁵⁶Bishop Anthony Fisher, "Struggling to Recover a Catholic Sense," *Zenit*, 03 March 2007, <https://zenit.org/articles/bishop-fisher-on-conscience-and-authority/>

⁵⁷D. Vincent Twomey, Pope Benedict XVI, *The Conscience of Our Age: A Theological Portrait*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007, 84.