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# **THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE: IS IT ALWAYS TO FOLLOW THE HIERARCHICAL MAGISTERIAL TEACHINGS?**

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## **Abstract**

Although the Vatican II assigned to a properly formed conscience of a person, the full dignity it deserves (as so consistently taught in the Catholic moral tradition), during the past few decades, there is a growing tendency within the Catholic fold to uphold the naïve, but erroneous view that conscience has to always simply and blindly follow what the hierarchical magisterium teaches. This essay is an effort to dispel such erroneous opinions, using the Catholic moral tradition and the official hierarchical teachings themselves. While recognizing the positive, indispensable role the hierarchical magisterium has to play in forming a believer's conscience, the article highlights the need for both the conscience and the hierarchical magisterium to be in constant dialogue in their search for moral truth.

**Keywords:** Catholic Moral Tradition, Dialogue, Formation of Conscience, Moral Truth, Objective Moral Norms, Personal Moral Responsibility, Vatican II

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## 1. Introduction

“What exactly is the relationship between the official Church teachings and the conscience of an ordinary believer with regard to beliefs and practice (faith and morals)?” If one were to pose this question to an ordinary Catholic, there will be various types of responses, but invariably most of them would boil down to something like: “We have to obey what the Church says” or “We have simply to follow what the Church teaches,” often implying that it is a passive obedience to Church teachings! Today, even among a vast number of bishops and priests such presumptions that amount to saying “A Catholic is to always obey literally the Teaching Office of the Church!” are quite commonly held. Unfortunately, all such exclusive statements that are often taken for granted within the Church circles are seriously erroneous, if one were to go by the Catholic moral tradition and the official hierarchical magisterial teachings,<sup>1</sup> themselves. According to the authentic, official Catholic teachings, a Catholic is rather to always obey/follow what is sincerely held by his/her properly formed conscience, of course, ably guided by the hierarchical magisterial teachings. The same official teachings go on to insist that even when at times a properly formed conscience happens to dictate things that might be contrary to the official Church teachings with regard to a given issue, one is to confidently follow one’s own properly formed conscience.<sup>2</sup> But what do we mean by the crucial phrase “properly formed”? What is the exact role of the hierarchical magisterium in such formation of consciences? Are Catholics always to merely repeat and blindly follow what the official Church teaches? Can they just follow whatever their consciences are supposed to hold? Do the Catholics believe in personal moral responsibility? What is the role of conscience in its search for moral truth, with regard to hierarchical magisterial teachings? In this essay, we hope to respond to these fundamentally inter-linked questions relying on the basic tenets of fundamental moral theology as found in the Catholic moral tradition and in the official Church teachings.

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<sup>1</sup>What we mean here by “hierarchical magisterium” is the formal teaching office of the bishops (in communion with the Bishop of Rome) in the Church. For a fine, succinct discussion on ‘magisterium’ as such, see John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 116-120; 156-174. Also, the classic work of Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: The Teaching Authority in the Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Cfr., *Gaudium et spes* (1965), 16; *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), 1-3. Henceforth, these documents will be referred to as GS and DH, respectively.

## 2. Personal Moral Responsibility

A hallmark of traditional Catholic moral theology is the prime place it assigns to personal moral responsibility. Simply put, if Christian morality in general is perceived as the response of a free human being to the divine call to be saved as revealed in and through the person of Jesus Christ, then, it should be obvious that it is fundamentally a personal decision. As such, the personal decision for the God of salvation, who calls the person to salvation, is not to directly do with the human action as such, but rather with the very person himself/herself.<sup>3</sup> Morality, thus, by definition, revolves primarily around the person or the moral agent who makes his/her decisions in view of the divine call to salvation, and takes responsibility for what he/she does or does not do, in response to that call. All other elements involved in the process of formulating and executing such a response, however important they be in making the moral decisions, become secondary. *As such, morality is first of all to do with the personal or the interior subjective aspects of the person.* Of course, this does not and cannot in any way imply that a person can ignore or neglect the objective aspects of morality. After all, God has created human persons not in isolation, nor to live in isolation, but to live with other human beings in society. In his/her very existence, a human person is fundamentally, a relational being, i.e., related to God, to one another and to the creation.<sup>4</sup> That is to say that no human person can have/live his own isolated subjective morality, according to his/her own whims and fancies. But this undeniable fact cannot relegate or suppress the priority of the personal, subjective or interior aspects of morality, as understood in traditional Catholic moral theology, down through the centuries.

If the acting moral agent acts in such a way as to blindly follow what someone else tells him/her to do or not to do (even if it is the Christian community in which he/she lives or even if it is the official magisterium of the Church that tells him/her to do so), then, common sense in general, and fundamental moral theology, in particular, tells us that such a person (moral agent) is not responsible for his/her acts. As such, neither he/she nor his/her acts would enter the realm of morality, in the first place. According to the best of Catholic moral tradition, the acting moral agent has to first of all

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<sup>3</sup>Cfr., Josef Fuchs, "Armonizzazione della Affermazioni Conciliari sulla Morale Cristiana," in René Latourelle (a cura di), *Vaticano II: Bilancio e Prospettive: Venticinque Anni Dopo (1962-1987)*, Asisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1987, 1020.

<sup>4</sup>Cfr. Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí* (2015), 66.

perceive what he/she is going to do or not to do, as morally good, and then be convinced of it, before performing the act. Again, that is to say, the moral agent has to freely choose what he/she is doing; he/she has to be responsible personally for what is to be done or not done. On this point, William May rightly talks about a two-fold dignity proper to human beings, both of which are intrinsic. The first is the dignity that belongs to every human being by the very fact of him/her being a member of the human family.<sup>5</sup> The second intrinsic dignity (which interests us in this essay) "is the dignity to which we are called as intelligent and free persons capable of determining our own lives by our own free choices."<sup>6</sup> May goes on to say: "The truth that human persons have the capacity to determine their own lives through their own free choices is a matter of Catholic faith."<sup>7</sup> It is the moral agent who has to take personal responsibility for what he/she does or does not do in this earthly life, as so clearly enunciated by Jesus himself in the Last Judgment scene (Mt 25:31-46). According to this dramatic Mathaeian account, no one else, however competent in moral matters he/she be (not even the hierarchical magisterium), will be held responsible at the Last Judgment for what the moral agent does or does not do in his/her freedom. It is the moral agent himself/herself who would be solely held responsible for his/her actions and omissions by divine judgment. That is why the Second Vatican Council<sup>8</sup> upheld the traditional Catholic belief that the dignity of a person is to be found in observing the moral law which the person perceives in his/her conscience, and then went on to say that by this very observance, the person will be judged.<sup>9</sup> The *Catechism* reaffirms the same belief: "In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law."<sup>10</sup> Linda Hogan expresses succinctly the traditional Catholic belief when she writes:

In traditional theological reflection conscience is regarded as the place where the person discovers God's will on ethical matters. Here the person "is alone with God whose voice re-echoes in his depths. In a wonderful

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<sup>5</sup>Cfr., William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, Huntington (Indiana): Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1991, 19-20.

<sup>6</sup>May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, 20.

<sup>7</sup>May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, 22.

<sup>8</sup>Henceforth this Council will be referred to as Vatican II.

<sup>9</sup>This is expressed officially in GS, 16.

<sup>10</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (1992), No. 1778. Henceforth, this document will be referred to as CCC.

manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and love of neighbor." It is the place where human freedom is realized, in the context of divine love and guidance. It is the site of personal, subjective apprehension of objective morality.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, today, this simple and obvious Catholic traditional moral truth is often forgotten, if not overlooked by many in their over-enthusiastic but erroneous sense of 'respect' for the hierarchical teaching authority of the Church.<sup>12</sup> However, Pope John Paul II in his *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) while acknowledging "certain positive concerns which to a great extent belong to the best of Catholic thought"<sup>13</sup> in the aftermath of the Vatican II in the field of moral theology, highlights the post-Vatican II "attempt to reaffirm the interior character" when he says:

There has also been an attempt to reaffirm the interior character of the ethical requirements..., requirements which create an obligation for the will only because such an obligation was previously acknowledged by human reason and, concretely, by personal conscience.<sup>14</sup>

This is an important papal affirmation for the purposes of this essay because a moral truth has to be perceived to be so first and foremost by personal conscience itself, and not by anyone else, not even by the hierarchical magisterium. Nor can the moral agent be coerced to see a particular teaching of the Church as a moral truth, merely because it is taught so by the hierarchical magisterium or whoever. The magisterium can only indicate and give guidance to a believing moral subject what is morally right or wrong, but not impose<sup>15</sup> — this of course is a logical conclusion of VS, 36. It is also a logical development of Vatican-II's teachings on the formation of conscience.<sup>16</sup> This cherished traditional Catholic belief is stated in a convincing way by Dolan when he writes:

...conscience is man's own judgment inasmuch as it is formed by his own mind operating on its own final estimate of facts. Even when he seeks counsel of others or follows a religious authority as objective norm, the

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<sup>11</sup>Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 24-25.

<sup>12</sup>This type of false sense of 'respect' is referred to by Pope Francis as "Spiritual Worldliness." See his *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), Nos. 93-97.

<sup>13</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), No. 36. Henceforth, this document will be referred to as VS.

<sup>14</sup>VS, 36.

<sup>15</sup>Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), No. 37. Henceforth this document will be referred to as AL.

<sup>16</sup>Cfr., GS, 16; DG, 1-3, 14.

individual must assume responsibility for following it (St. Thomas, *De veritate*, q. 17, a. 5, ad. 4). Neither counselor nor prelate nor even the objective moral law itself, can supplant the individual conscience as *immediate* norm of action, for there is no other way a man can judge his obligation than as he himself finally sees it when all data are in. If it be his human act then his conscience must have the last word as ultimate subjective norm of morality.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The Properly Formed Conscience

In ordinary parlance today, one wonders whether there is any other word that is so widely used, mis-used and at times, even abused, as the word 'conscience' is. That is why in contemporary society one often hears almost everyone saying: "I acted according to my conscience" after having acted in a certain manner. While such a claim could spring forth from sincerity and depth of a person, often, our day-to-day experience tells us that what is often meant by 'conscience' is an exclusively subjective element of one's ego. Although the Catholic moral tradition has assigned a uniquely important place to one's conscience, it is extremely important to note that in doing so it has never referred to any and every type of conscience in its teachings, but always only to what is called a "properly formed conscience." But what does it mean to have a "properly formed conscience"?

### 4. The Indispensable Dialogue between Conscience and Objective Moral Norms of the Magisterium

If one were to take the conscience of a person as the moral faculty or the forum wherein all moral deliberation and moral decision-making are performed,<sup>18</sup> then, it should be obvious (as already mentioned above) that basically morality is in the subjective realm. That is the way God has created human beings, i.e., each person has to discern and decide himself/herself in moral matters, and take full responsibility for what he/she decides and does. However, since human beings are created to live in society with others, they are also relational beings. Thus, morality cannot be purely a subjective affair. In fact, the basic etymological roots of the word 'conscience' would boil down to "to know with," which itself implies that conscience can never be an isolated moral faculty, fully cut off from the reality

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<sup>17</sup>Joseph V. Dolan, "Conscience in the Catholic Theological Tradition," in William C. Bier, ed., *Conscience: Its Freedom and Limitations*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1971, 12. Italics as given in the original text.

<sup>18</sup>Cfr., GS, 16; CCC, 1776-1782, 1790; VS, 54,58.

within which the moral agent is, i.e., it can never be independent or autonomous. Moreover, as taught so convincingly by the hierarchical magisterium, conscience is often not without the risk of falling into error.<sup>19</sup> In other words, personal conscience (especially when it is in isolation) is not always infallible. As such, it is important for conscience to know what is moral or immoral, not in isolation, but together with God (the creator), with other human beings and with the rest of creation.<sup>20</sup> It is precisely here that the accumulated moral wisdom of the community comes to the assistance of the moral agent, in the form of objective moral norms. Therefore, in moral deliberation and moral decision-making, a moral agent has to be in constant dialogue with the accumulated moral wisdom of his/her community which (in the case of Catholic community) is authentically and authoritatively interpreted by the hierarchical magisterium<sup>21</sup> and expressed in the form of official Church teachings which also include objective moral norms. That is why Vatican II taught that a person has to “strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality”<sup>22</sup> if he/she wishes to cultivate an upright conscience. The word “strive” is important because if one has always to be in objective correctness in one’s conscience, with perfect resonance with objective moral norms as proposed by the hierarchical magisterium, then, in a sense, one surrenders one’s personal dignity to objective norms or objective correctness; moreover, such a perfect resonance may not be possible always in our fallen, sinful condition as human beings. Whenever a conscience that has sincerely strived to be in dialogue with the objective moral norms happens to be in variance with what the official Church teaches, such a conscience surely is in error, from a purely objective point of view, but not from a subjective point of view. This error is not culpable subjectively, and so, is known traditionally as “invincible error.” The Catholic tradition has constantly upheld that a conscience in such invincible error has its own dignity, and so, must be obeyed by the person concerned: “Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity.”<sup>23</sup> This itself implies that the official Church does not

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<sup>19</sup>See for example, GS, 16.

<sup>20</sup>Cfr., *Laudato Si* (2015), 66.

<sup>21</sup>Cfr., *Dei Verbum* (1965), 10; *Lumen Gentium* (1964), 24-25; DH, 14. The first two documents will be henceforth referred to as DV and LG, respectively.

<sup>22</sup>GS, 16. Italics mine.

<sup>23</sup>GS, 16. A superb illustration of this teaching are the statements issued by the local Church hierarchies in the aftermath of the controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Cfr., Felix M. Podimattam, *Understanding the Encyclical on Birth Control*,

expect a properly formed conscience to blindly follow what the hierarchical magisterium teaches. However, a Catholic has to take the objective moral norms proposed by the hierarchical magisterium seriously and pay careful attention to them in his/her formation of conscience.<sup>24</sup> This is because the hierarchical magisterium is entrusted with the special task of guarding and authentically interpreting the revealed divine truth on faith and morals.<sup>25</sup>

In formulating this important Catholic belief Vatican II taught: "In the formation of their consciences, *the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.*"<sup>26</sup> The phrase "ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church" is of great significance for our purposes in this essay. It is said that the original draft presented to the Council Fathers for voting had the phrase "form it according to the Church teachings," but what was finally agreed upon by the Fathers and voted was the phrase "ought carefully to attend to..."<sup>27</sup> This significant change in the draft made in the Council floor is of paramount importance because there is a big difference between "forming according to" and "ought carefully to attend to." Thus, the Council teaching itself would give a direct answer to the title of this essay, namely, rather than merely repeating what the hierarchical magisterium teaches, each believer is called upon to "carefully attend to" it, before making any moral decision in his/her conscience. Here, one ought to see the great wisdom of the Council in assigning every properly formed personal conscience its due place as always had been held by the Catholic moral tradition, rather than making conscience a mere mouthpiece of the hierarchical magisterium.

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Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1982, 92-98. For a fine discussion on invincibly erroneous conscience in the Catholic tradition, see Brian V. Johnstone, "Erroneous Conscience in *Veritatis Splendor* and the Theological Tradition," in Joseph Selling & Jan Jans, ed., *The Splendor of Accuracy: An Examination of the Assertions made by Veritatis Splendor*, Kampen (the Netherlands): Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994, 114-135.

<sup>24</sup>DH, 14. According to VS of Pope John Paul II, "Christians have a great help for the formation of conscience in the Church and her Magisterium" (64:2).

<sup>25</sup>Cfr., DV, 10.

<sup>26</sup>DH, 14. The original Latin text reads: *Christifideles autem in sua efformanda conscientia **diligenter attendere debent** ad sacram certam que Ecclesiae doctrinam.* The official Italian version may also be of use for our purposes in this essay: *I cristiani poi nella formazione della loro coscienza devono considerare diligentemente la dottrina sacra e certa della chiesa.* The bold letters are mine.

<sup>27</sup>As a matter of fact, this particular phrase is taken from Pope Pius XII's Radio Message of 23 March 1952. Cfr., AAS 44 (1952) 270-278.



Of course, if all the moral contexts in the world were the same (uniform) at all times, then, in a sense, there would be no problem in retaining what was proposed in the first draft presented to the Council Fathers, namely, in the formation of their conscience, all believers having an obligation to “form it according to the Church teaching.” But as we know, not only are the moral agents different from each other, but they also live in different world contexts, at different times in history. Their particular contexts/circumstances are not the same. After all, diversity is a hallmark of our human world. Just as Thomas Aquinas taught long ago, when one arrives at particulars from the general, there is bound to be a lot of variations, even in moral material.<sup>28</sup> As such, one cannot rationally expect the hierarchical magisterium (even if it had the direct and explicit link to the Holy Spirit!) to give moral indications through objective moral norms that would suit all those varied contexts/circumstances all over the world.<sup>29</sup> After all, moral truth is not equal to some sort of a mathematical truth which is valid in any and every context and circumstances. In moral matters, everything cannot be simply reduced to black and/or white.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the Council’s wisdom to teach that in the formation of their consciences, the faithful “ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.” Therefore, while the hierarchical magisterium has the duty to propose objective moral norms that are valid for all contexts in general, it is the role of each person’s conscience to apply them carefully, prayerfully and attentively, to his/her particular context/circumstances. Hence the perennial validity of the conciliar teaching that in the formation of their consciences, the faithful “ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.” Therefore, for a Catholic believer, among the many sources that go on to form his/her personal conscience with the help of objective moral norms, the hierarchical magisterium occupies a unique and indispensable role, as the guardian and authentic interpreter of the revealed deposit of faith.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. The Distorted but Commonly Prevalent Contemporary View

However, we need to be careful not to exaggerate or even distort this indispensable and unique role played by the hierarchical

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<sup>28</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, art. 4.

<sup>29</sup>Cfr., Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), 4; Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 16, 184; AL, 300,304.

<sup>30</sup>Cfr., AL, 305.

<sup>31</sup>DH, 14.

magisterium in the formation of a believer's conscience. For some decades now strong tendencies of subjective individualism have been prevalent all over the contemporary world. Consequently, a sane balanced view of the relationship between the teaching magisterium and personal conscience has suffered seriously, in two main ways. On the one hand, those who freely float along individualistic subjectivism hold that the hierarchical magisterium has very little to do if at all in the formation of conscience. According to them, consciences are independent entities and so, are autonomous. Pope John Paul II's VS is a valiant attempt to address this situation. On the other hand, in over-reacting to such individualistic tendencies, there are those who hold on to a type of absolute objectivism that leaves no room at all for the personal conscience than to simply repeat what the magisterium teaches. While both these extreme positions do not reflect the official Catholic understanding of the formation of conscience, in the past three to four decades, unfortunately, it is the latter tendency that has gained an upper hand within the Church circles.<sup>32</sup> Those who uncritically interpret VS in an exclusively objective sense also belong to this group. Apparently, for them, the entire Catholic tradition on this issue can be reduced to a one-sided interpretation of this encyclical. In their reflections and writings on this issue, they rarely cite the Vatican II documents, and even when they happen to do so, such highly authoritative documents<sup>33</sup> are interpreted in such a restrictive, non-personal way that conscience is reduced to a faculty that has to merely repeat hierarchical magisterial teachings.<sup>34</sup> Conscience, accordingly, becomes nothing more than a re-echoing of the hierarchical magisterial teachings; a mouth-piece of

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<sup>32</sup>See for example William E. May, "Vatican II, Church Teaching and Conscience," in Charles E. Curran, ed., *Conscience: Readings in Moral Theology*, No. 14, New York: Paulist Press, 2004, 95-101.

<sup>33</sup>According to Canon 337 of the CCC, an Ecumenical Council is the most solemn form in which the College of bishops exercise leadership within the Church, and so it is obvious that Vatican II and its teachings are the most important and authoritative expressions of Church's official teachings. If so, one may safely infer that the conciliar teachings are more authoritative than any other single official teaching that emanated from the Pope or Vatican dicasteries in the post-Vatican II period. This is one reason why in this essay we rely almost exclusively on conciliar teachings whenever we refer to official Catholic teachings.

<sup>34</sup>For a fine illustration of this, see John M. Haas, ed., *Crisis of Conscience: Philosophers and Theologians Analyze Our Growing Inability to Discern Right from Wrong*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996. Interestingly, in the contribution of Haas to this volume, entitled "Crisis of Conscience and Culture," one notices just a single footnote that makes reference to the Vatican II out of a total of 64 footnotes. See pages 21-49.

the latter. However, the long-standing rich Catholic moral tradition does not substantiate such extreme non-personal, absolutist positions that have become predominant within the Church during the last few decades. As a matter of fact, the foundational conciliar text on conscience as found in GS, 16 ought to be interpreted more with a hermeneutical key that gives priority to personal responsibility than to a blind, automatic following of the hierarchical magisterial teachings, if one were to take seriously the overarching Personalist vision of the document GS as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

## **6. The Indispensable Dialogue between Conscience and the Hierarchical Magisterium**

From what we have said above, it should be obvious that on the one hand, the hierarchical magisterium has an indispensable, unique role in the formation of the consciences of the believers. On the other hand, the same hierarchical magisterium also has the duty to be always in dialogue with the Church community, in listening and discerning the voice of the Spirit of Christ speaking in and through the same community of which the magisterium is only a servant, not the master, especially in interpreting the accumulated moral wisdom of the Church.<sup>36</sup> That is to say, both the hierarchical magisterium and personal conscience have to be in constant dialogue, because none of them could function on their own, with regard to matters of faith and morals. The Holy Spirit is actively present both in the believing community<sup>37</sup> (in general) and in the teaching magisterium<sup>38</sup> (in particular) with regard to Catholic faith and morals. After all, Vatican II taught that the entire body of the faithful (“from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful”), anointed as they are by the Holy Spirit, cannot err in matters of faith and morals.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, each has to listen to the same Spirit actively present in the other, and discern his voice.

But unfortunately, today, in popular media and tabloids, and even among some influential Church personnel, frequently conscience and hierarchical magisterium are juxtaposed against each other. Such a

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<sup>35</sup>In fact, the discussion on conscience in No. 16 of GS is under the sub-heading “The Dignity of the Human Person.”

<sup>36</sup>DV, 10.

<sup>37</sup>LG, 4 affirms: “The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple.”

<sup>38</sup>DV, 9 states how the successors of the apostles (the magisterium) explains and makes widely known both the Sacred Scriptures and the Tradition while No. 10 states how the authentic interpretation of the Word of God is exclusively reserved for the hierarchical magisterium. See also GS, 33; LG, 24-25.

<sup>39</sup>Cfr., LG, 12.

simplistic, if not naïve approach is alien to the authentic Catholic moral tradition. Some authors hold that the roots of such an approach (that juxtaposes the hierarchical magisterium and personal conscience against each other) are to be found within the tradition's own ambiguity with regard to conscience:

The Catholic approach to conscience is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, conscience is regarded as the most fundamental and directly personal way that the individual apprehends moral goodness and truth. The church's constant but little publicized teaching is that conscience must always be obeyed. However, there is also an expectation that the judgments of conscience will be in agreement with church teaching. As a result there is an immediate and inevitable tension between conscience and the other moral authorities in Catholicism.<sup>40</sup>

However, the traditional Catholic approach to conscience is not extremist, i.e., it is not a question of "either or" with regard to conscience and the hierarchical magisterium; rather, it is an "and" approach which upholds the vital roles of *both* personal conscience *and* the hierarchical magisterium in the search for moral truth. Accordingly, there ought not be any tension between the two, but rather a healthy and indispensable dialogue between the two. In this sense, one needs to remember that the Vatican II got rid of the misleading pre-Vatican II distinction of *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discerns* (the teaching and learning Church), i.e., the whole Church learns at the feet of the Spirit of Jesus, and the whole Church has to discern together what that same Spirit tells the Church. As the theologian Joseph Ratzinger who was a *peritus* at the Council (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) points out, this "contrast between the 'listening' and 'teaching' Church is reduced to its true measure" by DV No: 10: "in the last analysis the whole Church listens, and, *vice versa*, the whole Church shares in the upholding of true teaching."<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, it is important to dispel the popular but erroneous belief that is quite common within contemporary ecclesial circles that the hierarchical magisterium has the competence even to produce moral norms on its own that are objective and always binding on the personal conscience.<sup>42</sup> Rather, it is the role of the hierarchical

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<sup>40</sup>Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, 2.

<sup>41</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background," in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. III, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969, 197.

<sup>42</sup>The reader needs to note carefully that here we are not referring to the infallible teachings of the hierarchical magisterium which are always binding on a Catholic conscience. There are quite a few such teachings in dogma but hardly any in morals.

magisterium to recognize or identify such objective norms in the deposit of faith, and propose them to the believers as moral guidelines to be followed. But again (as in the case of the personal conscience), it is imperative for the hierarchical magisterium, too, to do so not in isolation, not on its own, but together with and in the community of believers, i.e., the People of God.<sup>43</sup> Vatican II admitted clearly that the Church's hierarchy does not have solutions for all the questions/problems of the believers.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it also stressed the importance of consulting competent lay persons on certain matters.<sup>45</sup> That is to say that just as a personal conscience is not always infallible, so also, in spite of the special assistance of the Holy Spirit to perform its unique task in preserving and interpreting the deposit of faith, the hierarchical magisterium itself, too, does not have an exclusively direct line to the moral truth. After all, as already mentioned above, the Spirit of the Risen Christ is actively present not only in the hierarchical magisterium; neither is He actively present only in each and every baptized person, but in the community of all the baptized as a whole, i.e., in the People of God. Therefore, it is extremely important that the teaching hierarchy of the Church (though they have special assistance of the Holy Spirit in their unique teaching role) be in constant dialogue with the believing community, just as it is important for the person (the acting moral agent) to be in dialogue not only with the community, but especially, with the teaching hierarchy. As Vatican II taught, the hierarchical magisterium is not the proprietor of the deposit of faith of revelation, but is the servant of that deposit.<sup>46</sup> The eminent American ecclesiologist Avery Dulles, who later became a Cardinal, writes:

If we think of the magisterium as if it functioned automatically without dependence on human inquiry and debate, we can easily become victims of a myth of our own making. Modern psychology and theology are at one in pointing out that man likes to prostrate himself masochistically before an imaginary omniscient Church, thereby relieving himself of responsibility for his own religious convictions... Where this mentality prevails, the Church becomes a haven for persons who cannot endure the strain of freedom rather than a place where freedom is achieved. Dostoevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor gives classical expression to the Church's perennial temptation to become the enemy of human freedom.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Cfr., Kenan B. Osborne, *Orders and Ministry*, New York: Orbis Books, 2006, 169-170.

<sup>44</sup>GS, 33, 43.

<sup>45</sup>Cfr., GS, 40, 43-44.

<sup>46</sup>DV, 10.

<sup>47</sup>Avery R. Dulles, "Conscience and Church Authority," in William C. Bier, ed., *Conscience: Its Freedom and Limitations*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1971, 253.

Dulles goes on to say:

The myth of an omniscient magisterium with a “direct wire” to heaven is an illusion based on dark psychological tendencies. Certain pastors and religion teachers foster this illusion by exaggerating the authority of ecclesiastical documents and by acting as though conformity with the pope were the essence of religion. Vatican II, in several of its finest documents, cautioned against such extreme authoritarianism, and sought to emphasize the responsibility of the faithful for forming the mind of the Church. The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, for example, declares frankly that pastors of the Church do not always have solutions to every problem which arises, and acknowledges that, in the complicated and rapidly changing world of our day, the Church needs special help from experts in various sciences in order to “hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word.”<sup>48</sup>

Dulles stresses the need for dialogue between the hierarchical magisterium and the other realities:

As already mentioned, the magisterium is not omniscient; it has no power to pass judgment on questions that belong properly to human sciences such as history, physics, and philosophy. Even in religious area, its task can be little more than to find new ways of expressing the gospel of Jesus Christ. In working out new formulas of faith, the magisterium has to cooperate closely with the theologians and the faithful. In so doing it will not avoid all error, but it will minimize the number and seriousness of its mistakes.<sup>49</sup>

## 7. The Inviolable Primacy of a Properly Formed Conscience

According to GS, 16, conscience is the sanctuary or the ‘sacred reserve’ wherein a person is alone with God. This itself implies a unique personal dignity which the official Church assigns to a person’s properly formed conscience. The theologian Ratzinger in his commentary on this particular text wrote:

Over the Pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one’s own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official Church, also establishes a principle in opposition to increasing totalitarianism. Genuine ecclesiastical obedience is distinguished from

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<sup>48</sup>Dulles, “Conscience and Church Authority,” 253-254.

<sup>49</sup>Dulles, “Conscience and Church Authority,” 254.

any totalitarian claim which cannot accept any ultimate obligation of this kind beyond the reach of its dominating will.<sup>50</sup>

Obviously, Ratzinger was re-echoing the sentiments of Cardinal Newman whom he admired so much and whom he, as Pope, later beatified. In his famous letter to the Duke of Norfolk, Newman wrote: "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>51</sup>

Although the *Catechism* does not refer to this particular statement of Newman, it has another of his phrases taken also from the same letter to the Duke of Norfolk: "(Conscience) is a messenger of 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."<sup>52</sup> Highlighting the same primacy of a properly formed conscience over and above any other authority when it comes to searching for moral truth, Dulles writes:

While everyone knows that the Church sometimes makes mistakes, we still treat this too much as a theologically embarrassing anomaly, thus betraying our own failure to grasp the consequences of the Church's pilgrim state. Connected with this is an all-too-common concept of faith as a "blank check" by which we commit ourselves to whatever the Church teaches — as though the content really made no difference. In some juridizing theories, the motive for the assent of faith would seem to be the will of the magisterium rather than God Himself in His truthfulness. Once we eliminate this confusion between God's authority and that of the Church, we can begin to develop a theology of conscientious dissent within the Church. Assent should never be automatic. Every Christian has the right and duty to use critical good sense. The authority of the magisterium should be prudently weighed against the evidence of reason and against other authorities, such as the consent of the theologians and the sense of the faithful.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, it is a conscience that sincerely, prayerfully and carefully seeks the moral truth that can "prudently weigh" things in the face of what the authorities propose, and then, come to its own decision.

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<sup>50</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person" in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. V, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969, 134.

<sup>51</sup>John Henry Newman as cited in John Wilkins, "In all Conscience," *The Tablet*, 11 September 2010, 17.

<sup>52</sup>Cfr., CCC, 1778.

<sup>53</sup>Dulles, "Conscience and Church Authority," 254.

## 8. Conclusion

A Catholic is obliged to form his/her conscience by a sincere search for the moral truth, especially by paying careful attention to what the hierarchical magisterium teaches. He/she ought to genuinely strive to make the objective moral norms in such teachings his/her own, by being in constant dialogue with what the hierarchical magisterium teaches. Once he/she has sincerely and prayerfully done this, he/she is obliged to listen to the voice of his/her conscience (that presumably had been in dialogue with other moral sources as well) which becomes the supreme, inviolable law for his/her action, even if such action is in variance with what the hierarchical magisterium upholds as the ideal Christian behaviour. In the process, the hierarchical magisterium is of immense importance because it is her interpretation of the accumulated moral wisdom and guidance that gives a Catholic his/her unique religious identity. But in no way would this amount to what is commonly held today within Church circles: a mere repetition of what the hierarchical magisterium teaches as the indispensable norm for a believer's moral behaviour. Pope Francis' recent official assertion, is of course, the ideal and explicit response to our title, namely, the hierarchical magisterium has "been called to form consciences, not to replace them."<sup>54</sup> If so, as we had tried to demonstrate above, a properly formed conscience need not always blindly follow what the hierarchical magisterium teaches, while always it is obliged to pay careful attention to it and to strive to make such teachings its own.

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<sup>54</sup>AL, 37.