

# Vinayasādhana

Dharmaram Journal of Psycho-Spiritual Formation

VOL. X, No. 2, JULY 2019

## **Editorial**

### **Role of the Holy Spirit and Conscience in Formation**

Conscience is often considered as the voice of God that a person can choose to listen to. It has been connected to God and the voice of God speaking. “Conscience is the witness of God Himself, whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man’s soul, calling him *fortiter et suaviter* [with strength and gentleness] to obedience” (*VS* 58). Conscience according to St. Augustine is literally the voice of God which informs us intuitively what is right and wrong. The gap between God and man widens when a man hides his actions and becomes unwilling to confess them to God. Cardinal Newman took a literal approach to the meaning of conscience by considering it as a messenger from God rather than God speaking to us. Aquinas considered conscience as a “rational power, since it is not found in brute animals” and is our innate ability to understand what is right and wrong. The rationalist approach to conscience allows for human reasoning and practical wisdom. Many psychologists have tried to understand the concept of conscience. When Freud understood it as a pre-rational function of the unconscious mind, Fromm moved from understanding conscience from an authoritarian perspective to that to a humanitarian one.

Conscience is one of the most important themes in theological and formation circles. Today many scholars argue that conscience is humans yearning for wholeness. Bernard Haring said that conscience has to do with man’s total self-hood as a moral agent. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis invites us to think about the stresses in the family context and how it is hard to make room for the conscience of the faithful. He asks

us to “form conscience, not to replace them” (*AL* 37). There are three important components of conscience that can be acquired through education, training, practice, and experience (*VS* 63b; *CCC*). First, the basic moral principles must be learned through the natural moral law, through Divine Revelation and by the teachings of the Magisterium. Second, we must learn how to do moral reasoning, how moral principles apply to various situations in life. There should be an understanding of why a good moral principle is objective and consistent with universal application. Third, good reasoning in conformity with the truth and in pursuit of the good must be used when making moral judgments about particular human activity.

A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. Its’ judgments, according to reason, should be in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of God (*CCC* 1783). The formee, who may have been subjected to negative experiences, prefer their own judgment and reject the authoritative teachings, needs to be mentored by the formator to educate their conscience. A well-formed conscience helps inform us how to follow God’s will and is formed by studying and praying over the Church’s teachings, and then incorporating them into one’s life. Prayer is another way in which one can get in touch with one’s conscience. Pope Benedict XVI said, “Stillness means to develop inner senses, the sense of conscience, the sense for the internal in us, the ability to hear God.” Well-formed consciences also allow us to submit to the teaching authority of the Church which was given to her by Christ Himself. Our consciences guide us to make moral and reasonable decisions that conform to God’s laws and bring about our ultimate good and happiness. Every Christian is invited to be a part of Christ’s life and be grounded in the law and moral teachings of Christ. Conscience is a gift of God and a special channel of contact between God and the human heart. Our life in Christ has a community dimension, we belong to God’s family and we are responsible to live according to faith and the divine design of God.

The conscience and the Holy Spirit are two concepts that are interconnected and sometimes interchangeably used. Hanigan (1996) considered conscience to be of human capacity which is guided or instructed by the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no spiritual fruitfulness (Way, 2011). Christ had emphasized on two

things “I will ask the Father and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever- the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14: 16-17a); and “But the Spirit will come upon you, and you shall receive power” (Act 1:8). Christ emphasized that the Spirit is someone who comes from the Father, acts as a supporter to help us and will be with us throughout. The power that Christ also emphasized here has the ability to make one with the Holy Spirit to bear fruits while those without this power would only be capable of bearing the fruit of sin. The Holy Spirit is hence the supreme agent in transforming the conscience of the formee.

St Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 reflect the description of formation. The reader witnesses a transformation: it says that the “Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”; and those who have “unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s Glory” and be “transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” The freedom that the Spirit offers can be interpreted as that of the unburdening of oneself from the screen that made our minds dull and prevented us from seeing the grace of God. The grace that the New Covenant speaks of joins us with the image of Jesus Christ in faith and baptism. In the Church, with Baptism, every Christian begins to live under “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:2). The formee who joins the seminary needs to find the transforming grace that only God can provide so that they are no longer burdened with the thoughts of their conscience but will be able to let themselves be lead by the voice Holy Spirit. Pope John Paul II asks the Christians to enter into dialogue with God and His flock under the guidance of the Spirit so that we know of His extraordinary greatness in their vocation. Formation of conscience should become a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good (*VS* 63).

To develop a well-informed as well as a well-formed conscience, there are some rules to follow: one must always follow a certain conscience; take effort to change an incorrect conscience, and not act with a doubtful conscience (Vélez, 2009). Obeying certain judgment of conscience should be done with the awareness that one’s conscience is not free of errors and there is a possibility to get confused between what is right or wrong due to one’s ignorance (*CCC* 1790). However, one can educate oneself with the Word of God and the authoritative teachings of Christ

and of the Church. The prudent advice and good example of others support and enlighten our conscience. Since we are obliged to form our conscience according to objective moral standards, a regular examination of the conscience is required to develop a morally sensitive conscience. Aquinas argued that through reason and phronesis, we can apply moral principles to situations as best as we can, however, Butler argued that deliberate disobedience of the conscience to be worse than the act of disobedience which is a sin. Disobeying one's conscience usually leads to unpleasant feelings like guilt. Through the Sacrament of confession, a formee can come into terms with their past and look forward to deeper meaningful and fruitful acts in the Church community. The formator, who also understand that "God is love" and "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (CCC 733), would be able to love and accompany the formee as they face the challenges of formation.

The formation is first and foremost cooperation with the grace of God. The Church is the product of the work of the Spirit (Grenz, 2003) formed through the community that the Spirit has formed through the Word of God and the Holy Sacrament. Lee Kirkpatrick, in his seminal discussion, suggests that there is an attachment bond between a believer and God. Those going through Christian spiritual formation are encouraged to develop a secure attachment with God as it is integral to their formation and maturity (Yeo, 2016). Just as St John Paul II wished for the people to turn with trust to the Holy Spirit so that God may obtain for the Church the gift of many holy vocations, the formation community needs to pray for the formee to establish their trust in the Holy Spirit to guide their vocation. Christ said, "my sheep hear my voice... and they follow me..." (John 10.27). Formators should encourage the formees to listen to the voice of God by having daily Scripture reading time, frequent Sacraments of Confession and the Holy Eucharist, read about the lives of Saints and how God had worked in their lives. The formators can help formees to form their conscience and channel it to be guided by the Holy Spirit.