

# AN INTIMATE THING

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## Conscience

***“The heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and of his or her uniqueness, and the respect due to the journey of conscience, represents one of the positive achievements of modern culture” - Pope John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor***

**1. Sanctuary and heart** The Greek “syneidesis” means “knowing with oneself”; in Latin it is translated by “conscientia”. We should therefore begin by acknowledging conscience as the secret core and sanctuary of the human person. From this heart we know ourselves as *subjects*, that is, we are self-aware of our lives and powers. It is from this central space that we can communicate with others (unlike computers, which have no inner life). Conscience involves our affections, our deep convictions, our moral motivations, our religious heart. To want to enter this place from outside, to govern it from outside, is violation. This place can only be shared by a free invitation of communicative love. It is, however, an open space for God, and is therefore not a solitary prison, but a sanctuary in which God can speak, and be encountered.

**2. Judge and guide** We cannot say what is in another person’s conscience. It witnesses only to the person whose conscience it is. The response made to conscience is also secret and personal. The stand each person takes towards good is fixed there. When good is chosen the conscience is at peace, and when evil is chosen it arises, wakes up, makes its voice heard. It is thus a court, even a judge, discerning what to do next in each case. The verdict passed results either in approval and inner peace, or condemnation and inner remorse (see how there is nothing simply intellectual here: conscience includes feelings too). In Christian understanding it is vital that the heart should belong to God if the conscience is to make right choices.

**3. Fallible** It’s possible to be certain that something is good when in fact it isn’t. Human beings can always be wrong, so conscience can err. It can also be in a state of doubt, or hung between two conflicting values. Only right conscience can be both *true* and *certain*. Knowing this, we can accept a humble and listening attitude. Our conscience does not make, authorize, or guarantee the truth of what it perceives. It doesn’t *create* truth, but *recognises* it.

The secular world says conscience *is* infallible, thinking that conscience is just a *set of personal moral convictions sincerely held*. Integrity simply means acting in consistency with these strong convictions. Consistency, and the courage to stand up against opposition, constitute authenticity and morality in the world’s book. What gets left out is *the reasons* for holding this or that conviction. They are left to personal discretion, are a matter of personal taste. So the act of the conscience does not consist of a *judgment* (about right and wrong) but of a *decision* (about what to do next). The ultimate ground of these decisions is simply the individual will, which claims to make the good by choice, rather than by responding to who and what we are. Good will is thus free-floating, not anchored in human nature or the truth about the good of the person: the claim is that there is no such thing, that there is only the sovereignty of human will, free choice.

Therefore, in the absence of any other standards, “every view must be respected”, “everyone is right”, and “everyone is entitled to his or her opinion”, and “who am I to tell others that they are wrong?” If the ruling principle in one’s life is only one’s personal conviction, adopted out of choice, then of course there can be no call to obedience, no call to “be what you ought to be”. Moral struggle ought to be considerably eased by this notion, but the community of human understanding is irrevocably damaged, and the appeal to a common humanity must rest on the gamble that everyone will by autonomous choice adopt the same view. If “one’s personal perceptions” are to be accorded inviolability, then clearly the religious and secular views differ considerably. In according even to a mistaken conscience the inviolable right to freedom, the Church yet firmly believes that *conscience can make mistakes*.

A total commitment to freedom and approval of conscience is in fact not a principle in secular society either: we are still imprisoning those whose conscience allows them to murder or defraud.

**4. Conscience is inviolable when certain** The Church believes we can only follow what we know to be the truth: if we deliberately acted against our conscience, we would condemn ourselves. That is why an erroneous or false conscience, when the agent is not responsible for its error) retains its dignity and claim for respect and inviolability. But if the conscience errs through carelessness and neglect of the search for goodness, the state of the heart and mind are clearly at risk, and the moral life becomes blinded and loses its discerning ability.

**5. Conscience requires virtue** The working of the conscience is not completed when it has decided what is good. The person has to go on and *do* what is good. It would be useless to decide on goodness and then not follow one’s conscience. So the element of *virtue* - the “good use of our freedom to choose” - comes into play, and makes possible “the orderedness of love” (Augustine).

**6. Conscience is formed by God’s Word and Spirit** Conscience is formed constantly by hearing and welcoming teaching from Scripture and the Church. We do not proclaim the sovereignty of conscience as a *lonely* thing, but as accompanied and shared by the helping force of the living Word. Each person can count on the personal presence of God in the inner world, by which the Holy Spirit can form the natural conscience into a graced conscience. The powerful presence of the Church in the external world offers guidance and help towards the formation of the Christian mind.