

Conscience – God's Voice In Mankind
епископ Александр (Милеант)

On the nature of conscience

Once an impoverished woman stole something in a store and carried it away. No one saw her. On her way home a disturbing feeling gnawed at her peace of mind. She had to return to the store and replace the stolen item, after which she returned home feeling relieved. There are countless similar examples of people being compelled to do not what they want but what is right.

Every person is familiar with his inner voice which on occasion accuses and oppresses him, and on occasion brings him joy. This small subtle voice, an inborn feeling, is called conscience. Conscience by its nature is a spiritual instinct, which more clearly and quickly differentiates between good and evil than does the mind. He who listens to the voice of his conscience will never regret or be ashamed of his behavior.

In the Holy Scripture conscience is also called «heart.» In the Sermon on the mount the Lord Jesus Christ compared conscience to the «eyes» by which a person can evaluate his moral condition (Matt. 6:22). The Lord also compared conscience to a «rival» with whom a person must come to terms before he presents himself at God's Judgment (Matt. 5:25). The word «rival» stresses the main attribute of conscience: to oppose our evil desires and intentions.

Our personal experience convinces us that this inner voice, called conscience, is not under our control but expresses itself spontaneously in spite of our will. In addition, just as we cannot persuade ourselves that we are full when we are hungry or that we are rested when we are tired, similarly we cannot convince ourselves that our behavior is correct when our conscience tells us otherwise.

In the words of Christ regarding the «*indestructible worm*» (Mark 9:48), the Fathers of the Church see the guilty conscience that will punish sinners in the future life. The Russian poet A. S. Pushkin very vividly described these torments in his dramatic play «Miserly Knight:»

"Conscience –

A sharp clawed animal, which scrapes the heart;

Conscience – an uninvited guest, annoying discourser,

A rude creditor; and a witch,

Which dims the moon and graves.»

And further in the play, the old knight remembers in terror the pleading and tears of all those whom he deprived mercilessly. In a different drama, «Boris Godunov,» Pushkin again recreated the sufferings of a guilty conscience, placing in the mouth of the king Boris the following words, «...Yes,

pitiful is the one in whom conscience is foul!»

Conscience – a universal natural law

As narrated in the Bible, during creation God imprinted into the nature of man His Divine Image, which draws man toward everything that is morally good and averts him from everything that is morally evil. This inner law works through the voice of conscience, which justly is called the voice of God in man. Because it is an integral part of human nature, it is active in all people – regardless of their age, race, education, or development.

Indeed, studying the culture and customs of past and present nations, one notes that all people, even the most primitive tribes, distinguish between what is good and what is bad, between good man and evil man, between virtue and vice. They are all agreed on this: that the good is worth striving for, that evil be shunned, and that the one deserves praise, the other, blame. Though in individual cases they may not be one in denominating the same thing good or evil, they are nevertheless agreed as to the general principle that good is to be done and evil avoided. The occasional discrepancy in labeling some actions as good or evil seems to come from the particular circumstances in which a given nation develops. It is a universally recognized principle that one should not do to others what he would not wish them to do to him. Vice everywhere seeks to hide itself or at least to put on the mask of virtue.

The Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans explains in some detail how moral law works in man. The Apostle reproaches those who know the written Law of God but willfully violate it. He contrasts them with the pagans who *«not having a written Law, naturally observe the prescriptions of the Law. By this they show that the process of the Law is written in their hearts which is witnessed by their conscience and thoughts, which either punish or justify one another»* (Rom. 1:14–15). According to St. Paul, on the forthcoming Judgment Day God will judge men not only according to their faith, but also according to their conscience. Thus even the pagans may be saved if their conscience will witness to God their righteous life.

In general, conscience is a very sensitive moral evaluator – especially in children and young people, who are still pure and innocent. If we were not stained by sin, we would not need any external guidance, and conscience alone could precisely direct our behavior. The necessity for written law arose from original sin when man, dimmed by passion, failed to hear clearly the inner voice. In the present condition, both the written law and the inner natural law of conscience are needed; and they both speak of the same: *«Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you»* (Matt. 7:12).

In daily relationships with people, we subconsciously trust the conscience more than written laws and regulations. Indeed, it is impossible to have laws for every imaginable situation and to foresee how to preclude any attempts at breaking them. After all, shrewd people manage to twist and manipulate even the clearest of laws. So we hope that conscience, which works inside every person, will compel the person we are dealing with to do what is morally good and just.

Conscience in biblical narratives

No secular book witnesses about the existence of conscience in man as clearly as does the Bible. Let us examine a few more-prominent examples of this. Focusing first on some negative examples, we see that unkind behavior evokes in man shame, fear, suffering, feelings of guilt and even acts of desperation. For example: Adam and Eve, having tasted the forbidden fruit, felt ashamed and attempted to hide from God (Gen. 3:7–10). Cain, killing his younger brother Abel out of envy, subsequently began to fear for his own life (Gen. 4:14). King Saul, persecuting innocent David, later wept in shame when he found out that instead of retaliation for evil, David spared his life. (1 Samuel ch. 26). Proud scribes and Pharisees bringing forward an adulteress to Christ, dispersed in shame when they saw their own sins written by Christ on the sand (John ch. 8). Merchants and money lenders scattered in shame out of the temple when Christ drove them out, saying that the temple of God was not to be turned into a market (John Ch.2).

Sometimes the pangs of conscience become so intolerable that man prefers to end his own life. We see the most vivid example of accusations of conscience in Judas Iscariot, the traitor, who hanged himself after betraying Christ to the high priests (Matt. 27:5). In general, all sinners, believers as well as unbelievers, feel responsibility for their behavior. Thus, in the prophetic words of Christ, sinners at the end of the world, seeing the approaching judgment of God, will plead for the earth to swallow them, and the mountains to cover them (Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16).

It happens sometimes that a man in turmoil, caught in the swirl of strong passion or overwhelmed by fear, appears not to hear the voice of his conscience. But later, he feels the pangs of conscience doubly strong. When the brothers of Joseph came upon trouble, they remembered their sin of selling their younger brother into slavery and understood that they were now justly punished for their cruelty (Gen. 42:21). King David, delighting in the beauty of Bathsheba, understood his sin of adultery only after it was revealed to him by the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12:13). The impulsive Apostle Peter, under the pressure of fear, denounced Christ, but when he heard the cock crow, he remembered the prophesy of Christ and wept bitterly. The sensible thief, hanging on the cross next to Christ, understood only before his death that the suffering he experienced was a just reward for his crimes. (Luke 23:40). Zaccheas the publican, touched by the love of Christ, remembered the offenses he had perpetrated towards people in his greed and decided to rectify the wrong

he had committed (Luke 19:8).

On the other hand, when man is aware of his innocence, his clear conscience strengthens his hope in God. For example, the righteous Job, while suffering, knew that the reason for this was not because of any sins he had committed, but that it was in God's plan, and he hoped for God's mercy (Job 27:6). Similarly, the righteous king Hezekiah, dying from an incurable disease, became well when he pleaded to God for healing in reward of his good deeds (2 Kings 20:3). The Apostle Paul, whose life was dedicated to God and the salvation of men, not only did not fear death but, on the contrary, wished to be relieved from his earthly body to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23).

For a sinner there is no greater relief and happiness than to receive forgiveness and peace of conscience. The Gospel is rich with examples of repentance. One sinful woman in the house of Matthew, upon receiving pardon for her transgressions, in gratitude washed the feet of Christ with her tears and wiped them with her hair (Luke 7:38). On the other hand, a disregard of conscience along with recurring sins, darkens the soul to such a degree that man can undergo, as Saint Paul forewarns, «shipwreck of his faith» so that he can irrevocably sink into evil (1Tim. 1:19).

Psychological side of conscience

The study of the relationship of conscience to the spiritual attributes of man is the domain of psychology. Psychologists attempt to clarify two issues: a) Is conscience an attribute of man with which he is born, or is it the result of learning and encountering life's experiences in the environment in which he develops? b) Is conscience a result of the way our mind, feelings, and will operate, or is it an independent characteristic?

In response to the first question, closer examination of man's conscience convinces us that it is not the result of learned attitude or physical instinct in man, but has an unexplainable higher source. For example, children develop conscience before any adult teaching or modeling takes place. If physical instinct dictated to conscience, then it would induce man to behave in a profitable or pleasurable way. However, conscience often induces man to do that which is unprofitable or unpleasant. In spite of the appearance that evildoers enjoy the good life and virtuous people suffer, conscience tells us that a higher justice must exist. Eventually all have to receive their just reward. The universal presence of conscience for many people is the most convincing argument for God's existence and the immortality of the soul.

Regarding the relationship of conscience to other spiritual attributes of man: with his mind, feelings, and free will, we observe that conscience not only speaks of that which is theoretically good or evil, but she also obliges man to do good deeds and shun evil. Good deeds are followed by feelings of joy and satisfaction, whereas deeds of evil produce shame, fear, and spiritual unrest. In all of these manifestations, conscience uncovers in us the awareness of free will and responsibility.

Of course, reason alone cannot decide what is morally good or evil. It bases its judgment on the observation of something logical or illogical, wise or foolish, useful or useless. It is a property of reason to select useful opportunities over deeds of kindness. Nevertheless, something in man compels his reason to not only search for profit, as an abstract mathematical computation, but also to evaluate the moral value of his intentions. Doesn't it follow then that, if our conscience influences our reason, she is independent from it and even above it?

Considering how conscience works through free will, we observe that free will can desire anything, but this ability does not dictate to man what he must do. Human will, as we know it, often battles with demands of morality and attempts to free itself from its bondage. If conscience were a product of the free

will, then no battle would take place, no conflict. But the voice of conscience attempts to guide man's decisions. He may not always fulfill her demands, being free to choose, but he cannot ignore her voice, and when he does that, he does not escape an inner punishment.

Finally, conscience cannot be viewed as the product of feelings in the human heart. The heart craves pleasant sensations and avoids the unpleasant. But the rejection of moral demands often brings with it a strong spiritual conflict, which tears the human heart apart. We cannot escape the outcome in spite of our desire and effort. Therefore, in spite of being enclosed and dwelling within man, shouldn't we concede that conscience is an independent and superior characteristic which directs man's reason, will and heart with divine Law?

Preservation of a clear conscience

"Guard your heart more than anything you treasure, for it is the source of life» (Proverbs 4:23). With these words the Holy Scripture calls us to preserve our moral cleanliness. But what hope can a sinner have with an unclean conscience? Is he forever doomed? Fortunately not! In contrast to other religions, the great privilege offered by the Christian faith is the fact that it opens a path and gives the means for a complete cleansing of conscience. This path exists in the repentance of one's sins, and in a sincere desire to turn life around for the better. God forgives us because of His Only Begotten Son, Who on the cross brought cleansing sacrifice for our sins. In the sacrament of Baptism, and then in the sacraments of Confession and Communion, God cleanses man's conscience «from evil doing» (Heb. 9:14). That is why the Church places such great significance on these sacraments.

Moreover, the Church of Christ, through its teaching and the grace of the Holy Spirit abiding in her, enables the faithful to perfect themselves morally and make their conscience more discerning and sensitive. This is one of the high goals of our Christian life, as Jesus Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: *«Blessed are those whose hearts are pure; they shall see God»* (Matt. 5:8). Through a clear conscience, as through a clear crystal, God's light enters our soul and permeates its every corner. As long as this light remains in us, it guides our thoughts, elevates our feelings, strengthens our will, and helps us in every good undertaking. Through this blessed illumination, many Christians become instruments of God's providence. When this happens, a Christian not only enjoys spiritual blessings, but also becomes an instrument of salvation to others. Church history illustrates this with innumerable examples in the lives of its Saints like Seraphim of Sarov, John of Kronstadt, Elder Ambrosy of Optina, Saints Herman and Innocent of Alaska, Blessed Xenia of Petersburg, Archbishop John of San Francisco [Maximovich], and others who saved so many souls.

In conclusion, a clear conscience is a well-spring of all Divine blessings. People with clean hearts enjoy inner peace; they are gentle and benevolent. It seems that already in this temporary life, filled with trials and turmoil, God gives them a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. As Saint John Chrysostom puts it: *«Not fame and wealth, not great power and physical strength, not a magnificent table and elegant clothing, not any other human advantage can bring true happiness. This comes only from spiritual health and a clear conscience.»*

Some quotations about conscience

There is no witness so dreadful, no accuser so terrible as the conscience that dwells in the heart of every man (Polybius, c. 208–126 BC, History, bk. XVIII, 43).

Wisdom entereth not into a malicious mind, and science without conscience is but the ruin of the soul. (Francois Rabelais, c. 1494–1553, Gargantua and Pantagruel, bk. II, 8)

He that loses his conscience has nothing left that is worth keeping. (Caution, c. 1645, The Holy Court)

Trust that man in nothing who has not a conscience in everything.

(Laurence Sterne, 1713–1768, Tristram Shandy, bk 17)

Conscience is a sacred sanctuary where God alone may enter as judge. (Felicite R. Lamennais)

I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions.

(Lillian Hellman, 1905–1984, Letter to the House Committee on Un-American Activities)

Conscience is a soft whispers of the God in man (Edward Young).

Do not treat your conscience with contempt, for it always advises you to do what is best. It sets before you the will of God and the angels; it frees you from the secret defilements of the heart; and when you depart this life it grants you the gift of intimacy with God.

St. Maximos the Confessor

After God, let us have our conscience as our mentor and rule in all things, so that we may know which way the wind is blowing and set our sails accordingly.

St. John of the Ladder

He who lives in evil is punished in hell prematurely, being pierced by the conscience

St. John Chrysostom

The conscience should not be evaded, since it tells us inwardly how to live in conformity to Gods will, and by severely censuring the soul when the mind has been infected by sins, and by admonishing the erring heart to repent, it

provides welcome counsel as to how our defective state can be cured.

St. Philopheos of Sinai

A peace above all earthly dignities,
A still and quiet conscience.

Shakespeare

The disease of an evil conscience is beyond the practice of all the physicians in the world.

Gladstone

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