

The Primacy of Conscience in the Roman Catholic Tradition

Brian Lewis

Abstract: Everybody is aware of having a conscience, but ideas of what conscience is and how it operates differ. This is not surprising, as conscience is a complex reality, susceptible to a variety of interpretations. The question of the primacy of conscience has also in recent times been the subject of debate. This article aims to shed light on the issue by reviewing the theological development of the meaning and function of conscience in the Roman Catholic tradition through some of the key witnesses of that tradition in the moral field. Most importantly, it stresses the often forgotten dimension of the role of the virtue of prudence in the formation and judgment of conscience. This helps to illuminate how the primacy of conscience is to be understood.

A LOT OF CONFUSION EXISTS IN OUR COMMUNITY about the meaning and function of conscience. In the popular mind conscience is often identified with one's personal moral beliefs and convictions, whether these be understood in a Freudian way as the residue of parental and societal injunctions or rather as personally interiorised and made one's own. For others, particularly those influenced by phenomenology, the idea of conscience as emotional reaction (especially guilt) to what one has done or contemplates doing predominates. Others again use the word in the context of rights.

As has often been pointed out, the Bible itself treats of conscience at two levels: first of all, in a profound sense as being the fundamental ethical structure, the seat of Christian interiority, by which the person is engaged totally in a new existence in Christ, with all the practical implications of that, and secondly on the level of a particular function of moral judgment or discernment about what ought concretely be done or avoided.¹ In view of the confusion mentioned above and current controversy surrounding the term, it would seem appropriate to investigate whether and in what way these two dimensions of

1. See Jean-M. Aubert, "Conscience et Loi" in B. Lauret and F. Refoulé (eds.), *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, tome IV (Éditions du Cerf: Paris, 1984) 205-207.

conscience are to be found in the Roman Catholic tradition as it has developed through some of its key witnesses in the moral field. My intention is to consider first the thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas. Summing up the teaching of Scripture and the early Fathers of the Church, Aquinas established the theological framework with respect to conscience for the following centuries. Significant in the subsequent Roman Catholic tradition was the contribution of the eighteenth century moral theologian Alphonsus Liguori. As I shall indicate, Liguori set the scene for the modern development confirmed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and beyond. My intention, in short, is to trace the historical continuity in the Catholic tradition with the aim of bringing clarity to the contemporary discussion.

FUNDAMENTAL CONSCIENCE

Basing himself on the etymology of the word (*cum alio scientia*), Aquinas understands conscience properly speaking as the application of what one knows (in the broad sense of knowing) to the moral evaluation of a particular act, done or to be done. It is an act, a judgment. For this reason conscience is said to bear witness to what one has done, to instigate or to bind to a certain action, or to accuse or blame a person for something done. All these usages result from the actual application of knowledge to something done.² However, Aquinas concedes, following Jerome, Basil and John Damascene, that the name conscience may also refer to the basic inclination in the depths of the person to human good and value, which he called *synderesis*. By this he meant the habitual and ineradicable grasp of the fundamental moral principles, such as "love and do good", "shun evil", "respect human life and property", and "seek truth", that must guide the judgment of conscience in particular situations. This habitual or fundamental conscience, somewhat akin to the sense of moral value, is natural and innate in the human person.³ Of course, from the Christian perspective one must also take account of faith and all that flows from it.

With the passage of time the teaching of Aquinas was misinterpreted by some of his followers. They developed an excessively legalistic and deductive understanding of "natural law" that stressed the absoluteness of an objective moral order inscribed by God in the human mind and that made conscience consist in conformity to this order.⁴ In this context the great defender of the dignity of conscience became Alphonsus

2. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ed. Marietti: Italy, 1952) 1a, 79, article 13.

3. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 79, article 13; see also article 12.

4. This school of thought persisted right up to the Second Vatican Council and was reflected in the draft document "On the Christian Moral Order" presented by the Preparatory Commission to the Council in 1962. It was in fact rejected by the Council. See S. Maiorano, "Coscienza e verità morale nel Vaticano II", in M. Nalepa and T. Kennedy (eds.), *La Coscienza Morale Oggi* (Rome: Editiones Academiae Alphonsianae, 1987) 260-66.

Liguori. As has been stressed by his modern commentators,⁵ Liguori upheld the true positions of Aquinas but developed them in a more personalist way, thus preparing the ground for the modern era.

Reacting against the rigorism of the moral theology of his times and enlightened by his pastoral work among the poor of Southern Italy, Liguori came to a deep appreciation of the vocation and the mystery of the human person. Within the depths of the freedom of the person he saw a vital and dynamic overture towards God, the Supreme Good and Ultimate End of all human striving. This mystery of the human person could be called the fundamental or "transcendental" (in a metaphysical not a Kantian sense) conscience of the person. Not that the person is consciously aware of it, but there is an involvement of the inner spiritual resources of the person in it. It is there prior to consideration of any particular line of action, for the person has a breadth and depth above and beyond the particular issues that are confronted. All subsequent value judgments about particular issues emerge from it.

This personalist understanding of fundamental conscience is confirmed and further developed by the Second Vatican Council in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*.⁶ Against the background of a personalist anthropology, which takes account of the meaning of the human person illuminated by the mystery of Jesus Christ, conscience in a fundamental sense is seen as "the most secret core and sanctuary" of the person, where one is "alone with God, whose voice echoes in one's depths" (GS n.16). In other words it is the *interiority* of the person, an interiority which makes the human person a distinctive reality and "more than a speck of nature or an anonymous element of the (human) city" (GS n.14).

It can also be said that conscience is the *transcendence* of the person, for, as in this interiority the human person "outstrips the whole sum of mere things", being re-inforced in this inner self "whenever he or she enters within the heart, where God who probes the heart awaits", where "beneath the eyes of God" true human destiny is discerned (GS n.14). So one meets God, as one understands God, in one's inner depths. It is a meeting of persons, not in the first place a confrontation with a law. The interiority of conscience is not an interiority of isolation but of communion and of dialogue, a discovery of oneself person to person with God, a discovery of God's word as truth summoning all reality, and for

5. For example, Dominic Capone, "Per la teologia della coscienza cristiana", *Studia Moralia* 20 (1982) 221-50; and "La teologia della coscienza morale nel concilio e dopo il concilio", *Studia Moralia*, 24 (1986) 69-94; Louis Vereecke, *De Guillaume d'Ockham à Saint Alphonse de Liguori: Études de l'histoire de la théologie morale 1300-1787* (Rome: Collegium S. Alfonsi de Urbe, 1986). See further Kevin O'Shea, *The Courtesy of God* (Sydney: Redemptorist Fathers: 1988 [out of print]).

6. Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966) 199-308. I am indebted here to S. Maiorano, "Coscienza e verità morale", 266-72.

this reason a discovery of other persons as call, as word, as reciprocity. In the light of the creation of human beings in the image of God, the Council stresses the indispensable dimension of human intercommunion:

God did not create man (woman) as a solitary. For from the beginning "male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion (marriage). By his (her) innermost nature the human person is a social being, and unless humans relate to others they can neither live nor develop their potential" (GS n.12).

The second major point the document makes is that this interior dialogue matures in the experience of the moral "tug", the sense of obligation. "In the depths of conscience the person detects a law, not imposed upon oneself but holding one to obedience. Always summoning the person to love good and to avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to the heart: do this, shun that" (GS n.16). It is important to note that the sense of moral obligation relates to something more profound and more demanding than just a practical decision in regard to a particular instance. It is the very person who is experienced as under obligation to be a certain kind of person, that is, a loving, relating person. Fundamental conscience is a decision about *being*. The experience of particular decisions comes only gradually. The importance of faith here is stressed. "It is finally through the gift of the Holy Spirit that man (woman) comes by faith to the contemplation and appreciation of the divine plan" (GS n.15). In other words, conscience reaches the ultimate level of reality: that of the meaning which faith recognises in the mystery of Christ, in whom the divine plan is revealed, who is both Word and summons to live in response to the call of God.

The law referred to above is not the "natural law" (though this is not excluded) but the New Law, which is "the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ";⁷ it is the law of laws, the law which consists in love "that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given us" (Romans 5:5). As such this can be known fully only by conscience, which is the place where the voice of God resounds: "In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour" (GS n.16). The conciliar approach is thus centred upon the law of love, an order of persons in communion with one another and with God.

7. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 106, article 1.

SITUATIONAL CONSCIENCE

Fundamental conscience is brought to bear on an individual situation in a judgment on the morality of that situation. This judgment may be called "situational" conscience, moral conscience in the proper sense.

As has already been pointed out, conscience in the proper sense according to Aquinas is the application of what one knows to the moral evaluation of a particular act, done or to be done. It is not a mere deduction from general principles but involves the individual person in a search for objective truth in the light of experience into the circumstances of the act that confronts him (her). In this process of deliberation the person reflects on the various ways of achieving the goal sought in the action and assesses the morality of each alternative that suggests itself. In doing this the seeker will be guided by the basic law of love that should influence all his (her) moral thinking and judging. One's personal value system and the convictions one has about what is right and wrong will also come into play. Personal experience of what usually results in such cases may be drawn upon. In situations of particular difficulty or which are beyond one's own experience one may, and where appropriate should, seek advice from others wiser than oneself: parents, teachers, professional counsellors, the Church community to which one belongs. *The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* of Vatican II adds: "In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men (and women) in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships." (GS n.16). For one who accepts the Church as in a special way illuminated and guided by the Spirit of Christ, this advice should have particular relevance and importance.⁸ The energy expended on this search for objective moral truth should of course be proportionate to the complexity and importance of the situation confronted.

The final phase of this process of deliberation and reflection is the practical and normative judgment: "This course of action is good and should be done, bad and should be avoided." It is not the source of the moral obligation laid upon the person in this situation but it makes the moral obligation known and transmits it. This is the true and proper act of situational conscience according to the Roman Catholic tradition.

8. The obligation of assent to such teachings and the meaning of Vatican Council II's requirement of "religious submission of mind and will" have been quite fully canvassed by theologians. See, for example, Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist, 1983); Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1989) 153-61, 205-19; Arnold Hogan, *On Being Catholic Today* (Melbourne: CollinsDove, 1993), 101-104, 133-47; Vincent MacNamara, *The Truth in Love* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1989) 162-71; Ladislav Ørsky, "Magisterium: Assent and Dissent", *Theological Studies* 48 (1987) 473-97.

It is recognised, however, that conscience is fragile. Lack of a moral sense, false ideas, prejudice, social pressures (such as the excuse that everyone does it) or just sheer negligence are fruitful sources of errors of judgment. In the teaching of Aquinas a right or correct conscience (where the judgment of morality is in accord with objective truth) obliges of itself and always. An erroneous conscience obliges only in a negative sense: one may never go against it, whether its judgments be that a particular act is morally good or bad. And he gives a couple of rather startling examples to illustrate the point. Not to have extramarital sex, he says, can be mistakenly seen as a bad thing. In this case one does wrong in refraining, because one is prepared to choose what one sees as an evil. For the same reason it would be wrong for someone to believe in Christ when this is erroneously apprehended as a bad thing. In either case, according to Aquinas, one does evil.⁹

However, in following an erroneous conscience one does not for this reason alone do something morally good. Error in judgment may be due to deliberately willed ignorance either of moral principle or of the facts of the case, or it may result from negligence in knowing what one has an obligation to know. This sort of erroneous conscience does not excuse one from moral fault. In the view of Aquinas, however, an erroneous conscience that is quite involuntary and innocent excuses from sin but does not positively make the action one does morally good.¹⁰ His reason is that it makes the action completely involuntary and so puts it outside the sphere of morality altogether. On the other hand, taking into account other resources the person has, Liguori and many modern theologians make the point that in this case the action may be morally good if it is done for a good intention.¹¹ One would then be morally obliged to follow it.¹²

Moral theologians today generally agree that the judgment of conscience needs to be seen in a broader perspective, that of the person called to choose the good, to be virtuous, and so to reach the ultimate goal of life. Two points can be made in regard to this. First, more important and more fundamental than following one's conscience is the underlying obligation to do all possible to ensure that one's conscience is right, or objectively true.¹³ One is responsible *for* one's conscience.

9. "It must therefore be said, without qualification, that whether the reason be correct or mistaken, the will which is at variance with it is always evil", *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae, 19, article 5. Eric D'Arcy has a good discussion of this in his *Conscience and its Right to Freedom* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961) 75-111.

10. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 19, article 6.

11. "When one acts prudently one ought without doubt merit because of the good end one has in acting, namely the glory of God or love of one's neighbour, etc." (A. Liguori, *Theologia Moralis* [ed. Gaude; Rome: ex typographia Vaticana, 1905] 1.1.1. 6; I, 4).

12. Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, 1.1.1. 5; I, 4.

13. At this level of course one often has to settle for a considered opinion about the matter without being sure of being right. Moral certainty cannot be put on the same footing

Secondly, since a person may opt to set aside the judgment of conscience, to refuse to do what is judged to be morally good, virtue is needed to ensure that one chooses rightly. Traditionally this virtue is called the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom.

CONSCIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE VIRTUE OF PRUDENCE

Morally good choices made consistently and meaningfully require a person to be tuned in to the moral goods or values which constitute the truth of living together with other human persons in community. This is what is implied in being a morally good or *virtuous* person, one who by education and training and experience of life has become habituated to respond positively to these values. The permanent dispositions by which one responds to them, adheres to them and is always ready when called upon by circumstances to intend them in personal choices or decisions, are precisely what is meant by moral virtues. Principal among these moral virtues and necessary to their functioning is the virtue of prudence.¹⁴

The virtue of prudence, in the sense of responsibility, discernment, practical wisdom or simply good sense,¹⁵ combines proper acceptance of the basic human goods and goals with clear perception of the relevant circumstances in a particular situation and brings this to bear on the individual moral decision to be made. It facilitates deliberation about the right means of reaching a particular goal and enables the virtuous person to make a correct judgment in ordinary or even extraordinary situations.¹⁶ It is thus the virtue by means of which the human person is enabled to have a right conscience and without which one fails to perceive how the basic human goals can be realised in situations in which judgments of conscience have to be made. It is a virtuous instinct, which "divines" a pathway through complex circumstances of human behaviour and enables the person facing these circumstances to decide rightly in conscience what should be done or not done.

Drawing its discerning or "divining" power from fundamental conscience (the energy of freedom deep within the mystery of the person) the virtue of prudence channels that energy to the particular issue at hand in its particular context with all its attendant circumstances, in such a way that it "knows" what is morally right about it at

as metaphysical or scientific certainty. It is the certainty that excludes the reasonable fear of erring.

14. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 19, article 6, 2 ad 1.

15. Following Aristotle, this virtue is referred to as "prudence". The word is retained here despite its unwelcome connotations in English. The classical treatise on the subject is of course that of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 47-53. See Dominic Capone, *Intorno alla verità morale* (Naples: Universitas Gregoriana, 1951)

16. See Terence Kennedy, "L'idea di coscienza morale secondo S. Tommaso d'Aquino", in *La Coscienza Morale Oggi* (n. 4 above) 145-75.

this moment. It is like the turning on of a moral light, illuminating three things simultaneously: first, fundamental moral principles, which are seen as pertinent to this situation, second, relevant material moral norms, which here take on a special actuality, and third, the right way of acting for the person here and now in this concrete situation and in these circumstances. This right way of acting is seen and chosen. This is the moment of decision of conscience.¹⁷ As already mentioned, the decision is not a deduction from the principles, nor is it a selective application of the relevant specific norms. It is not an inference process at all. Rather, it is a “divining”, a discernment, of the right course of action in view of this goal to be realized. And, since it is a decision of conscience, it is binding decision.¹⁸

Prudence is not only a naturally acquired virtue, a product of experience. In the Roman Catholic tradition it is also a specifically Christian virtue, a quality of spirit divinely infused through grace. Conscience is thus guided by the virtue of charity directing the person to God and informed by infused prudence in the quest for the loving thing to do in a particular situation. The divine gift of Counsel also illuminates the deliberation process.

The final result of reflection and deliberation, then, is a moment of inner conviction about the moral path chosen in this instance. It is a genuine moral interiorisation. According to Liguori, unless and until this moment of conviction comes, law of any kind is not binding on the person and the basic freedom of the person remains. In the light of his vision of the person sketched earlier and translating into phenomenological language what he said in the rather forensic language of his time, it is possible to highlight three key points that must be maintained: first, the primacy of *truth*: in all integrity one must follow truth as he or she sees it; second, the primacy of *conscience*: seeing the truth means a real interiorisation, in the conviction of personal conscience; and third, the primacy of *freedom*: law binds a person only when it is fully interiorised and able to command conviction in conscience – otherwise, the basic freedom of the person remains intact.¹⁹

17. An ongoing in-house discussion revolves around this issue. According to scholastic commentators on Aquinas, the judgment of conscience is distinct from the decision arrived at under the influence of the virtue of practical wisdom. Others see no problem in identifying the two and seeing them as two different modalities of the one complex moral act. This may be the true mind of Aquinas; it is certainly how Liguori sees the matter.

18. See O’Shea, *The Courtesy of God*, 15-17

19. O’Shea, *The Courtesy of God*, 18-19

THE PRIMACY OF CONSCIENCE

This traditional expression has formed part of Roman Catholic teaching for many centuries.²⁰ It cannot be lightly put aside or considered to be mistaken.

However, the primacy of conscience has never been understood in a radically subjective sense, as though conscience were a law unto itself independently determining moral good and evil or a purely arbitrary judgment tailoring the morality of one's actions to one's personal wishes. It is not just a matter of saying, "I have a right to do what my conscience tells me to do simply because my conscience tells me to do it." As has already been pointed out, in arriving at a judgment of conscience one must search for the objective truth. "The more a correct conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by objective norms of morality" (GS n. 16).²¹ The Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican II (*Dignitatis Humanae*) stresses the point that all "are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and his Church, and to embrace the truth they have come to know, and to hold fast to it" (DH n. 1).

Objective truth thus has a certain primacy, but the same paragraph goes on to say that "it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force". In other words, no objectively true formulation can take the place of conscience, for it is through the mediation of conscience that one "perceives and acknowledges the imperative of the divine law. In all one's activity one is bound to follow one's conscience faithfully", in order to "come to God, for whom we were created" (DH n.3).

According to Aquinas the ultimate truth of human action is determined by the object of the act, not as it is in itself, but as it is in intention. In examples he gives in his commentary on the Ethics of

20. The expression is often used explicitly. Sometimes equivalent expressions are used. For example, Eric D'Arcy refers to "the sovereign authority of conscience" (*Conscience and its Right to Freedom*, 75). John Henry Newman in his *Difficulties of Anglicans* speaks of conscience as "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness" (quoted in Robert Hodge, *What's Conscience For?* [Middlegreen, Slough: St Pauls, 1995] 217). In his commentary on the documents of Vatican Council II, Joseph Ratzinger says: "for Newman, conscience represents the inner complement and limit of the Church principle. 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 the ecclesiastical authority." ("The dignity of the human person", in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 5 [London: Burns & Oates, 1969] 134-36).

21. "The maturity and responsibility of these judgments – and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject – are not measured by the liberation of conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by the truth in one's actions". Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor: Encyclical Letter On Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching* (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul's, 1993) §61 (p. 97).

Aristotle, one who seeks poison thinking it to be honey in truth seeks honey; one who fornicates thinking he or she is doing good in truth tends to good.²² Competence therefore regarding the truth belongs to conscience. Although there is no question that conscience ought to conform to objective truth in everything, the goodness or badness of our actions is in the concrete made known to us according *as it is judged by conscience*, that is, as personalised and interiorised. Conscience has to discover the sweetness and also the force of truth.

Traditionally this is expressed by speaking of conscience as the *proximate measure* of personal morality.²³ In this vital moment the whole person guided by love and led by prudence implements or denies the thrust of his or her being towards the goals of human living, and ultimately to the final goal, God. The goodness or badness of the act in the abstract, which is considered in ethics and which is often expressed in norms or laws or codes, is goodness or badness only potentially, "materially"; it is pre-morality; it is almost always a *flexible* indication of the line to be followed.²⁴

In this perspective moral truth is not an application of an impersonal norm. It is the truth of fidelity to conscience. As Capone says, "the dignity of conscience is wholly in being function and value of this new person; in rendering testimony to our spirit as to whether in all our moral decisions we express our being in Christ the children of God our Father".²⁵ The moment of inner conviction is, morally, the moment of truth - not speculative or absolute truth, which is not possible in moral decisions, but moral truth. Prudence or practical wisdom as virtue cannot err, for it is not just reason reflecting on morals as one might do in the classroom or lecture hall, but reason discerning the harmony or disharmony of an act with the person's actual intention at the time and ultimately with one's personal well being. In the light and force of the goal intended, prudence not only seeks the objective truth of what is to be done but above all evaluates its suitability to the achievement of this goal, the attainment of which is personal happiness or flourishing. This is properly speaking what this virtue is about and the moral truth here is the truth of direction to the end intended. The judgment of conscience is, therefore, not intellectually rigid but something profoundly human, so as to be able to assimilate even error, a typical human characteristic. And here the truth of the decision of conscience consists in the vital

22. See Dominic Capone, *Intorno alla verità morale*, 44-45

23. According to Liguori, the rule or measure of human acts is twofold: one remote, the other proximate. The remote or material rule is the divine law; the proximate or formal rule however is conscience. Formal is here opposed to material and indicates that morality is formally or properly constituted by conscience; cf. Capone, "La teologia della coscienza morale nel concilio e dopo il concilio", *Studia Moralia* 24 (1986) 244.

24. "La teologia della coscienza morale", 244.

25. Cited by S. Maiorano, "Coscienza e verità morale", 272.

harmony of the choice with the right willing of the goal.²⁶ This is often referred to as an informed conscience.

It follows from all this that if, because of unavoidable lack of knowledge, the decision of conscience fails to conform with the objective demands of the situation, conscience as right and morally true in the formal sense does not lose its dignity nor cease to make the concrete act morally good. For this reason Liguori taught that confessors not only may but must leave honestly mistaken people in peace, provided there be no risk to the common good or the rights of others. And, he said, this situation occurs quite often in pastoral practice.²⁷ "Conscience", says Vatican Council II in its above mentioned Constitution, "frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity" (GS n.16). It does not lose it because its dignity is not first of all the dignity of conformity with objective laws, but that dignity proper to the human person, namely to engage freely in a sincere search for the moral truth of his or her situation. Only when this personal dignity is lost does conscience lose its dignity: "The same cannot be said of one who cares but little for the search for truth and goodness, or of a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of a habit of sin" (GS n.16).

Other implications of the primacy conscience follow from this. No one is to be forced to act against conscience. The right and the duty to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is discovered would be compromised unless persons "enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom" (DH n.2). For the same reason it is never justified to restrain anyone from acting according to conscience. This right is essential to human dignity. However, as in the exercise of all freedoms, it is subject to personal and social responsibility. Individuals and social groups are bound to respect the rights of others and to honour their own duties towards others and the common welfare of all. The declaration goes on to say that "society has the right to defend itself against possible abuses committed on pretext of freedom of religion. It is the special duty of government to provide this protection. However, government is not to act in arbitrary fashion or in an unfair spirit of partisanship." (DH n.7).

In order to be in harmony with the dignity of the person the whole journey towards the truth is lived according to the demands experienced in conscience and each person is bound to follow these demands faithfully. To interfere with this is to attack not only the human person but truth itself.

26. "In what concerns the goal, the rectitude of reason consists in the conformity to the willing of the due end. But the willing of the due end itself presupposes correct grasping of the end, which comes about through reason", Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 19, article 3 ad 2.

27. See O'Shea, *The Courtesy of God*, 24-5.