

ON CONSCIENCE AND CONSCIENCE FORMATION

By
Frits Albers

Even before the Oceanic Synod in December 1998 got off the ground, the Holy See wasted no time in using the opportunity of pointing out to the assembled Australian bishops the serious defects that over the years had developed within the Catholic Church in their country, affecting the Faith of millions of individual Catholics. For all future generations it will remain a shameful indictment of the Australian Episcopal Conference that, in the second half of the twentieth century, the initiative had to come from Rome, and that the Holy See had to acquaint the bishops of Australia with the well-nigh impossible situation that was still going on unchecked, because the shepherds of the flock were either not aware of what was going on, or did not have the courage to use their authority to stem the tide.

The “*Statement of Conclusions*”, drawn up after a four-day meeting between representatives of six Sacred Congregations of the Roman Curia and a group of Australian bishops, clearly deals with:

- a “Crisis of Faith” within the Church in Australia. It points to
- a “Crisis of Christology”,
- a “profound change of anthropology”,
- a concerted effort to “raise the individual conscience to an absolute”.

Following on from these profound changes in Catholic Faith, the *Statement* identifies:

- the existence of “great problems to Christian morality”,
- indifference to the poor,
- racial prejudice and violence,
- abortion,
- euthanasia,
- the legitimization of homosexual relationships
- and other immoral forms of sexual activity.

And if all this was not enough, the ‘*Statement*’ has uncovered the existence of

“Problems in Ecclesiology” [clearly a matter of ‘one ‘church’ or faith being as good as another’] “that flow from the above-mentioned uncertainties concerning God and Jesus Christ”.

In a word: these are defects so obvious and profound, that every bishop could have noticed them from his own observation, or at least could have become aware of their existence if only he had believed the thousands of letters through which good Catholics had never ceased to bring these defects to his attention.

Now one thing has become very clear after all these years of utter chaos and confusion: If the bishops and priests of Australia after the Second Vatican Council had been brought up on a Theology that had been firmly grounded on the “*Everlasting Philosophy*” of St. Thomas Aquinas, they would never have failed to isolate all that Rome had to hold up to them. Then, after the accurate reading of “the signs of the times”, they would have found in that same philosophy and theology the means of combating the evils that were creeping in long before they got out of hand as they are now. Instead, they handed over the effective running of their dioceses to the worst kinds of feminists and modernists who strongly advised them that their advice was born out of Vatican II

In present-day Catholic Australia, we of the Australian Marian Academy of the Immaculate Conception, not being able to deal with all that Rome has demanded should be rectified, can deal only with isolated topics. The one chosen for this paper is the question of *conscience* which the Holy See has brought to the notice of the Australian bishops for their urgent attention in the following words taken from Number 6 of the *Statement*:-

Challenges to Christian Anthropology.

Behind the above-mentioned elements is a profound paradigmatic change in anthropology that is opposed to classical anthropology. It is characterised, for example, by an extreme individualism, seen especially in a concept of conscience that elevates the individual conscience to the level of an absolute, thus raising the subjective criterion above all objective factors and having no point of reference beyond itself. Another example is a change in the relations between creation, nature, body and spirit, resulting in certain forms of feminism which express an anthropology profoundly different from classical anthropology.

From the chaos in Catholic affairs that lies so eloquently expressed in the drawn-up *Statement of Conclusions*, one other conclusion is inescapable:

the priests and future bishops of post-Conciliar Australia have *not* been brought up on a Theology that has for its foundation the *Everlasting Philosophy* of St. Thomas Aquinas. That this constitutes a deliberate flouting of a serious command issued from the Magisterium of the Catholic Church can be seen from the following words:-

In view of all this it is not surprising that the Church will have Her future Priests brought up on a Philosophy which derives its methods, its system and its basic principles from the Angelic Doctor. (Can. 1366, 2 in the old CJC).

In view of all what?

In view of

‘*Aeterni Patris*’, Pope LEO XIII, Aug. 1, 1879, Encyclical;

‘*Doctoris Angelici*’, Pope St. PIUS X, June 29, 1914, Motu Proprio;

‘*Quod de fovenda*’, Pope Benedict XV, Mar. 19, 1917, Letter to Jesuits;

‘*Studiorum Ducem*’, Pope PIUS XI, June 29, 1923, Encyclical;

‘*Directive of the Sacred Congregation of Studies*,’ Mar. 7, 1916;

and further extensive directives contained in

‘*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*’, Pope St. PIUS X, Sep. 8, 1907, and

‘*Humani Generis*’, Pope PIUS XII, Aug. 12, 1950.

One thing is clearly established by the long experience of the ages: his teaching appears to chime in by a kind of pre-established harmony with Divine Revelation. No surer way to safeguard the First Principles of the Faith”.

[“*Humani Generis*”].

Let the Academies already founded or to be founded by you (the bishops) illustrate and defend this doctrine and use it for the refutation of prevailing errors Be careful to guard the minds of youth from those fountains which are said to flow from St. Thomas, but in reality are gathered from strange and

polluted streams.

[“*Aeterni Patris*”].

“... gathered from strange and polluted streams”. How relevant this still is on the eve of the year 2000 can be gathered from one of those ‘strange streams’, *the Geelong deanery*. In its “*Geelong Deanery Digest*”, Vol. 19, June 1999, we can read the following headline:

“Promising Start for New Venture in Ecumenical Theological Education in Geelong”.

This ‘*polluted stream*’ leads to a ‘*Bachelor of Theology*’ degree and going by the glowing letter of recommendation from the pen of Mgr. James Murray, PP of St. Mary of the Angels, this course “*is a combined venture of the Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran and Uniting Churches*”. The letter further states:

“*I strongly recommend this venture to you [Msgr. is speaking directly to Catholics here], and I hope and pray that a number of Catholics will avail themselves of this great opportunity to study theology*”.

What hope have they got ...!

... reason borne on the wings of Thomas to its human height, can scarcely rise higher while Faith could scarcely expect stronger aids from reason than those it has already obtained through Thomas.

His teachings are such that those who hold to it are never found swerving from the path of truth, and they who dare assail it will always be suspected of error.

[*Aeterni Patris*].

“Always” includes June, 1999....

If Catholic Doctrine is once deprived of this strong bulwark, it is useless to seek the slightest assistance for its defence in a philosophy whose principles are either common to the errors of materialism, monism, pantheism, socialism and modernism, or certainly not opposed to such systems. The reason is that the capital theses in the Philosophy of St. Thomas are not to be placed in the category of opinions capable of being debated one way or the other, but are to be considered as the foundation upon which the whole science of natural and Divine things is based. If such principles are once removed or in any way impaired, it must necessarily follow that students of the sacred sciences will ultimately fail to perceive so much as the meaning of the words in which the Dogmas of Divine Revelation are proposed by the Magisterium of the Church. [*Doctoris Angelici*].

Are these words written for post-Conciliar Australia or not? Do they accurately describe (with maybe two exceptions) ‘theology’ in the Australian seminaries and the Geelong deanery of today? Oh sure, the majority of those who leave those seminaries and courses have carved out for themselves a cosy niche in the contemporary pagan world, but from that niche – as the *Statement of Conclusions* so vividly depicts – they will neither save their own soul nor those of others. Maybe here is the place to use a quote which sums up all the foregoing. It is a testimony by two opponents, *Bucer* and *Theodore Beza*, incorporated by Pope LEO XIII in his encyclical “*Aeterni Patris*”:-

If the teaching of Thomas Aquinas were only taken away, they could easily do battle with all Catholic teachers, gain the victory and abolish the Church.

This is not an exaggerated description of Catholic life in Australia in the year 1999, the Year of the Eternal Father, “*Aeterni Patris*”.... As can be seen from the above quote, it is

rampant in Geelong and in numerous other places in Australia. This shows that overwhelming evidence is available from Papal documents, from the ‘*Statement of Conclusions*’ and from our own daily experience, that the vast majority of Catholic bishops in Australia have *not* been brought up on the philosophy and the theology of St. Thomas.

The opponents ‘have done battle with Catholic teachers; they have gained a major victory and have abolished most of Catholic life in this country’. And if Pope St. Pius X is right, then it will be “*useless to seek the slightest assistance for its defence*” in other ‘philosophies’. And to make the point of this particular lecture crystal clear: it will be equally useless to expect from non-Thomists sound teaching on the subject of Conscience. Thus, as anything of lasting value can hardly be expected to come from the Hierarchy in Australia in the present state of utter confusion and paralysis, we may as well ourselves do what the Holy See has demanded should be done: the urgent correction of so many erroneous consciences found to be prevalent amongst Catholics in this country.

The subject will be approached first from Thomistic Philosophy and then from the Theology built on that.

Section I. CONSCIENCE IN THE LIGHT OF THOMISTIC PHILOSOPHY

It must be stressed here that the endless combinations of psychological, moral and intellectual influences do interfere with the basic pattern of the interaction between a soul and Grace, and that these differ from person to person. All this is studied in applied sciences like psychology, anthropology, behaviourism, counselling, etc. But experts in these fields would be wasting their time and that of their clients if they ignored, or were ignorant of, the true *foundation* that underlies *all* interaction between *every* human being and Divine Grace. And it is only *one* Philosophy that carries the guarantee that it has this interaction right. This is the same as saying that only Thomistic Philosophy can tell us how this interaction between soul and Grace works and should work according to the *one* reliable “blueprint” which the Creator has made to underlie *all* personal differences: the *one* human nature. As we know from papal assurances, the Holy Church founded by Christ has not a vestige of a doubt that Thomism found the ‘*key*’ needed for the accurate reading of this blueprint.

Creation then, according to Church belief, is the calling into existence by the Almighty of other beings outside Himself, who will be forever stamped with at least two characteristics concerning their origin:-

- (1) “*ab initio*”: with a beginning, and
- (2) “*ex nihilo*”: from nothing.

Since we speak about ‘the *Act* of Creation’, St. Thomas found it very convenient to keep alive in his system this powerful meaning of ‘*this first act*’ of the Almighty, and to keep the term “*act*” connected to this whole idea of “*calling into being*” or “*being called into being*”. From here on we will restrict ourselves deliberately to the crown and glory of the material creation: *the human being*. From (1) above we see that the human being does exist albeit with a limited existence, and from (2) above we accept that we can truthfully say of the human being that, surrounding his limited existence, there is a lot he is *not*

He is *not* a submarine, or a whale, or his next door neighbour, or the Archangel Gabriel, etc. etc. Since the human being cannot give himself his own existence, his existence depends so

much on '*the first act of creation*', that St. Thomas calls 'existence' by its proper name: *actus primus*, 'first act' or 'primary act'. My existence as a human being is 'the first act' or 'the primary act', but a 'first act' *about* me, not *my* first or primary act since I did not make myself. I was called into being by Someone else's 'primary act'. However, once created as a human being by this 'primary act' of God, I am now a living 'primary act', His primary act as far as my existence is concerned.

And yet, since God called me into being and gave me existence, I can now call this existence *my* existence, and the act that produced it *my* primary act. Not *mine* as if performed by me, but truly *my possession* because it was given to me for a very definite purpose.

We have now arrived at a momentous fact of life and at a most consoling truth: Once constituted in existence as God's 'primary act', I am now able to perform my own acts, that is, as we saw, I can now 'call into being' some of that which as yet was not. All these acts, my acts, St. Thomas calls quite reasonably "*secondary acts*", in Latin: *actus secundus*. It is clear that all my secondary acts flow totally and only from the *nature* the Creator called into being when He gave me 'existence', i.e. when He gave me my personal 'primary act', my existence. All secondary acts are limited by the nature one received in the primary act.

With this we have discovered the bedrock on which the whole of Thomistic philosophy is built: human *nature* is *invariant* for every human being, just as Divine Nature is invariant for each of the three Divine Persons in the Blessed Trinity, the foundation of our Faith that there is only *one* God. Now it is very necessary that we come to terms with that immense expanse of all that the human being is *not*, but (according to (ii) above, and this remains important) from which he came. If his 'primary act', his own existence, came from what is not, then it is the fate of all his (own) secondary acts, that they share in this fate, and that they too come from what was not before. Even the simple task of putting my hand to my head shows the difference between primary and secondary act. My hand is part of 'my primary act', my human existence. It is there, but it was not always there. It too was created and came from nothing. But when I put my hand to my head, my secondary act, I must admit that it was *not* there a minute ago and that I could have put it somewhere else. All my secondary acts, that is all that I now bring into existence, remain surrounded by a vast expanse of what I *could* have done, a sea of almost endless '*possibilities*'....

This is such an obvious word to choose, that St. Thomas did just that, and gave the name '*potential*' to that sea of 'not-my-existence' and yet *possible existence*. If a photo was taken of me with my hand at my head, I would have proof that I once 'existed' with my secondary act: my hand at my head. Which would be preferable to a photo showing that I once existed with another 'secondary act', another 'potential' or 'possibility': with my hand in the till Some of this created '*not-my-existence*' (potential) surrounding me cannot possibly become incorporated in 'my primary act', my existence, but is itself not impossible to exist. I will never become a car or a fish, although 'cars' and 'fish' do exist.

But there are other secondary acts which the human being is not as yet, or has not done or made as yet, but which he could *be*, or *do* or *make*, or *become*, like making a car, or being a mother, or becoming a doctor. But it is important to realise that whatever 'secondary act' a human being will do or become, this secondary act will always be made up of these two components: what it eventually *is*: act (existence), and what as yet it was *not*. It is to this 'not yet' that Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy wisely gave the name '*potential*' or 'potency'. So the human being is capable of bringing forth secondary acts from the nature he received from his Creator, and from the 'potential' by which he is surrounded. And once the choice has been made, this new existence again is made up of what it *is*: the act (existence) eventually chosen, and that whole lot of what it *is not*: potential-, or possible-, or not-yet existence from

which it came, showing again that vast expanse of what he could have done or become instead, that is, to which he could have given 'act': existence.

A piece of marble is in a '*potential*' state of *becoming* a sculpture; seeds are potential flowers or trees. Human beings are not only 'in potential' of becoming engineers, teachers, housewives, artists, but also of becoming children of God, or even Saints, sharing in the Divine Nature of God by Baptism! All the secondary acts are there to 'realise', i.e. 'to make real', to bring into existence, the potentials that the nature of a human being is capable of. To bring the 'actus primus' of his/her existence to perfection by choosing what is needed to become a *good* teacher, a *good* engineer, a *good* housewife, etc. We spoke briefly of what is meant by '*not my existence*', that, as a vast void, surrounds the primary act of human existence, and from which are drawn all humanity's secondary acts. But with his beautiful teaching, St. Thomas has transformed this void into a huge and plentiful ocean, brimming with all sorts of potential possibilities.

What an almost limitless panorama unfolds itself before us.

How richly endowed is man in his 'first act' of creation. His human nature in which he stands created 'in the image and likeness of God' with his spiritual gifts of intellect and will, feelings, freedom of choice, memory, inclinations and aspirations. To that must be added the beautiful attributes that belong to his corporal and material make-up: his brain, the five senses, his physical strength and great endurance, his avidity to learn and master his surroundings, and his powers of recuperation and procreation, all contributing to an almost endless variety of choices and secondary acts, leading up to, if chosen wisely, the perfection of his primary act, the act by which he came forth from the loving hands of his Creator. "*The perfection of his primary act*" we said. The perfection of his very own share in human nature

....

Here at last we have discovered the gold we are after. Let us polish it up so it will glow with the brilliance it received from God, before a grateful St. Thomas enshrined it as one of the crown jewels in his system. The Divine Law 'dictates' that God lives according to the infinite perfection of His own divine Nature. In God there is no distinction between primary act and secondary act. God is infinite, unlimited, necessary and perfect Existence. God is *all* Act, which St. Thomas wisely calls 'Actus purus', Pure Existence. *Existing* is Nature to Him, and it is His Nature to exist.

Since God therefore is *necessary* existence, there is no 'potential' in God, no becoming something He was not already before. The only 'potency' we may attribute to the Divine Nature is that God is *Omnipotent*.

Divine Law demands that, at the level of Creation too, *all* secondary acts of His rational creatures are performed according to the nature of the Primary Act, and lead to its perfection. That is, that they make real, that they 'bring into existence' its glorious potential. God lives according to His Nature which is unlimited perfection, called Holiness. As we saw, it is *this stamp* of God which is left on every rational creature that comes from His hands. It is this particular 'brand': to live according to the perfection of human nature, to perform secondary acts leading to the perfection of the primary act, which is left *on every human being* as the necessity, the dictates, of the Natural Law. *Natural Law* then is the human participation in the Divine Law. And the *Natural Law* dictates that *only* secondary acts are chosen which lead to the perfection of the primary act: human existence.

And it is right here, on the borderline between Primary Act and Secondary Act, that human *conscience* has its permanent home *to secure this perfection*.

Conscience is *not* the human brain. Conscience has immediate access to the human intellect. It dictates which secondary acts in any given situation will lead to an intermediate perfection of the primary act, that which is immediately required for the moment, and sounds a warning against secondary acts which would injure the perfection of human nature and might even impair human nature itself. Conscience has the power to arrest both intellect and will. The borderline between the primary act (human nature as created by God and given to a human person) and individual secondary acts is wholly subconscious. And it is *conscience* which makes known what happens on the border. This conscience is capable of doing, because it is in the primary act, that is in human nature itself, that the Divine Law: to live according to the perfection of one's primary act, lives as a permanent and indelible reminder.

And it is the contemplation of any possible secondary act which triggers that living reminder into 'conscience': either by encouraging the choice of a good act or warning against choosing a bad act. Conscience is *not* 'the voice of God' telling us what to do. When a car is being driven beyond the physical endurance of its 'primary act', it is not the car manufacturers who are telling the nut at the wheel how to treat the car properly: it is the screeching of the car itself protesting against the secondary acts to which its primary act is being subjected. In the same way, conscience is a safety device for human nature, an alarm that rings when secondary acts are being performed, or even contemplated, which violate the natural law: the human participation in the Divine Law, which says, 'that everything that exists must act according to the perfection of its nature, its primary act'.

Conscience can be overruled by intellect and will. Like the 'nut at the wheel' can turn up the radio to drown the 'voice with noise'. But until the total breakdown in hell, where the ruin of human nature will be fixed forever, this friction between the primary act and the wrong secondary acts will remain as a guide for both intellect and will. Once conscience penetrates into the conscious level, its message may be misinterpreted.

This is especially the case with fallen human nature, where conscience has to cope with 'an inclination to evil', assisted by a host of unbridled desires. And then there are the already mentioned psychological, intellectual and moral influences in individuals, interfering with a calm and rational analysis of the conscience messages. And even if the poor intellect *does* understand, 'the flesh is weak'. Yet even if its voice has been dulled, a persistent uneasiness about a certain way of life is conscience's way of asking for an investigation and consequent further information. All this is one of the reasons why conscience can never be elevated to an *absolute*.