Conscience: Still the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, now for adults

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This, at least, is how I read the doctrine of Protestants as well as of Catholics. The rule and measure of duty is not utility, nor expedience, nor the happiness of the greatest number, nor State convenience, nor fitness, order, and the pulchrum. Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.

Thus, Blessed John Henry Newman in his famous "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk." The quote captures his brilliance as an essayist, the phrase "a long-sighted selfishness" a masterpiece of communication and construction. But, it does something else: While Newman is keen to differentiate conscience from any kind of subjective whim, the quotes captures the liveliness of conscience and the unmistakable fact that conscience speaks, as it were, inside of our lives. Not in any abstract categorization can it be affirmed or denied.

With the publication of a letter from Pope Francis to Argentine bishops regarding the implementation of Amoris Laetitia, conscience is back in the Catholic news. Here at NCR, two prominent theologians, Todd
Salzman and Michael Lawler, published an excellent essay this week that gets to the heart of the debate about what conscience does and does not entail. They summarize the debate, writing:

Stated succinctly, is conscience subjective and internal and truth objective and external, whereby the subjective and internal conscience must obey and conform to the objective and external truth? Or does conscience include both the objective and subjective realms, whereby conscience discerns and interprets its understanding of objective truth and exercises that understanding in the subjective judgment of conscience?

This accurately characterizes the views of conscience held by both sides in the debate. Those who have so far resisted Pope Francis' effort to revitalize an understanding of conscience that is both Catholic and adult argue that "[t]he role of the conscience is to know and apply these norms as a deductive syllogism. That is, synderesis, a property of the intellect, has an innate natural grasp of moral principles of divine law -- do good and avoid evil. These principles are formulated into objective norms, such as do not steal, do not lie, or do not receive Communion if you are divorced and remarried without an annulment." What is missing from this view is the possibility of growth and of grey. You either are, or you aren't, in good standing. You either are committing a mortal sin or you aren't. The whole thing is very act-centered when I think most of us know that the sins of the spirit are the ones that wound most deeply. The anti-Francis view mimics Newman's conviction that a definitive judgment is rendered by conscience, but it forgets that render is a verb. What exactly does the conscience have to do here? A computer can do what the opposition expects a conscience to do.

The alternative stance, closer to what Pope Francis is clearly after, understands that conscience is not mere subjectivity, a kind of whim whipped into an ontological norm, Newman's "long-sighted selfishness." They write, "Using the first principles of practical reason as a hermeneutical lens for analyzing what our relationship with the world is to be, being 'guided by the objective norms of morality' (Gaudium et Spes, 16) and attending 'to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church' (Dignitatis Humanae, 14), among other sources of knowledge, conscience as objective-orientation gathers as much evidence as possible, consciously weighs and understands the evidence and its implications, and finally makes as honest a judgment as possible that this action is to be done and that action is not." Here, the vocabulary does not suggest stasis. "Guided" and "attending" and "weighs" and "finally makes" all these suggest movement and activity and life.

Salzman and Lawler argue that Pope Francis' vision sees conscience as a quintessentially human attribute, one that is rooted in our dignity as created by God, and just so, it requires an internalization of God's love and His law, not a mere formal adherence. "The essential point for conscience as object-orientation is the relevance of the objective norm from the perspective of the inquiring subject in light of the understanding of all the circumstances in a particular historical cultural context [emphasis mine]. The implications of this perspective on the relationship between conscience as object-orientation and objective norms is that conscience should be guided by those norms but the authority of conscience is not identified with whether or not it obeys the objective norm. Otherwise, Dignitatis Humanae could not advocate for religious freedom, where 'every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true [objective] judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means.'" I would say it is ironic, but it is more likely just sad, that those prelates who have been most keen to wave the religious liberty flag are also those who have been most resistant to Pope Francis' initiatives in Amoris Laetitia.
The authors quote Francis sounding very Newmanesque and refuting the idea that this latter approach to conscience is mere subjectivism or relativism. The pope said back in 2013:

So we also [like Jesus] must learn to listen more to our conscience. Be careful, however: this does not mean we ought to follow our ego, do whatever interests us, whatever suits us, whatever pleases us. That is not conscience. Conscience is the interior space in which we can listen to and hear the truth, the good, the voice of God. It is the inner place of our relationship with him, who speaks to our heart and helps us to discern, to understand the path we ought to take, and once the decision is made, to move forward, to remain faithful.

This shows why the headline of Lawler and Salzman's article misunderstands what they are saying. It claims, "In Amoris Laetitia, Francis's model of conscience empowers Catholics." The verb "empower" is entirely wrong: Conscience, the voice of God, demands obedience. God is the one empowered by it.

Here, I want to note something that I wish Lawler and Salzman had focused on with greater attention. I placed an emphasis in one of the quotes above when they referred to "all the circumstances" and the importance of applying the moral norms in a vast array of such circumstances, no two of which are exactly alike. True enough. But, it is not only the circumstances that are varied. The church's teaching is varied as well. One of my principal problems with the non-Francis view is that it ignores some teachings of the church in favor of other teachings, when those are experienced by the person as being in conflict. As the Holy Father said in Paragraph 311 of Amoris Laetitia, "At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its con-crete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel."

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Chicago Archbishop Blase Cupich has been publishing a series of essays that examine Amoris Laetitia and it is clear that his views track with those advocated by Francis and expounded by Lawler and Salzman. In his latest installment, he made these observations about conscience and discernment that warrant much reflection:

You have heard the term 'examination of conscience.' Unfortunately it has too often been portrayed as making a check list of our failures. But this is too simplistic. If we look at the holy men and women in Scripture, we discover a much richer approach to discerning the will of God. It is one marked by an openness to how God is calling each of us in our particular circumstances, not only to correct our sinfulness -- which we must do -- but also to strike out on new paths with a sense of wonder about our lives.

So an authentic discernment must involve questions such as, 'How and when have I experienced God's grace and call in moments of loss, accomplishment, sinfulness and reconciliation? What have I learned about myself? What good habits and virtues have I acquired in those experiences? What weaknesses have I struggled to overcome on my own because I have not allowed God's grace to heal them?'

That's pretty Pope Francis-like, yes? The starting point is not in the code of canon law but in how God is
already at work in one's life. This approach is rooted in Scripture more than in natural law and, just so, has the immediate appeal of the evangelical Catholicism we need. It invites rigorousness in looking forward, as well as backward, and in paying attention to the possibilities of our lives as well as our defects. It gets away from the inherent Pelagianism of checklist spirituality and points us to the deeper reality of conscience. As Cupich writes later in his piece: "In the end, forming a good conscience cannot be reduced to simplistic questions of following a law, doing what others expect or feeling good about myself. Neither can the idea of conscience be reduced to listening to the angel on my right shoulder rather than the devil on the left. It is deeper than that. Conscience involves the orientation of our very being. Do we turn toward God? Do we do so in a way that respects the whole of creation?"

The discussion about conscience and its relationship to moral norms, and to the vocation of Christian discipleship more generally, is long overdue. The debate also might get heated: Any day now we anticipate getting a report from the ad hoc committee of the USCCB, chaired by Archbishop Chaput, on the implementation of Amoris Laetitia. All of us, not just the bishops, should take the discussion seriously and we on the left should especially do so, so that we do not confirm the fears of the conservatives that this invocation of conscience is merely an effort to justify a relativism that has no place in the Christian faith. If the anti-Francis view treated us as children, in rejecting it we must agree to act like adults and treat conscience as the "aboriginal Vicar of Christ" that it is.

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