

CONSCIENCE WITH THE MILLENNIUM

BY FR. CONOR DONNELLY

Shakespeare in Richard III tells us :

"My conscience has a thousand several tongues, and every tongue brings in a several tale, and every tale condemns me for a villain." [act v, scene iii]

This common experience of disapproval was often noted in his works.

Conscience can be described as an act of the mind telling one what is right and wrong, which prods us to follow it and accuses us if we do not. Conscience cannot create what is right or wrong but must discern it, and man's moral growth and dignity consist in following its dictates. The softest pillow to sleep on is a tranquil conscience.

Where morality most affects the ordinary person is in the day-to-day decisions, and it is this act of moral judgement that we call conscience. Newman observes, "the sense of right and wrong is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous".

For some judgements of conscience have become simply subjective decisions based on feelings, utilitarian principles, self-interest, or social demand. It is for this reason that two groups of people can come to diametrically opposed conclusions on important subjects and both appeal to conscience for their decision.

Newman foresaw this trend, "when men advocate the rights of conscience, this in no sense means the right of thinking, speaking, writing and acting according to their own judgement or their humour. They do not pretend to go by any moral rule but they demand what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases ... Conscience has rights because it has duties, but in this age with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, it is the right of self will." [Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, London, 1876, p 250].

The supposed freedom of the self appointed conscience can lead to chaos.

Error does not have rights, persons do.

When a patient consults his GP about a headache, the doctor does not arbitrarily decide on the diagnosis and treatment; he looks to the universal principles of medicine. Similarly, when a case comes before a court, the judge does not decide arbitrarily about the sentence; he looks to legal practice or the constitution. These are objective guides, outside of himself. The same happens with conscience. Before doing an action, our conscience decides whether it is right or wrong not by itself, arbitrarily, as if it were the author of the moral code, but by universal principles of right and wrong. These principles can be derived from the end of man. If we believe that man has no end or purpose, then moral principles make no sense. Various phenomena can occasionally substitute this rational approach to assessing human behaviour. One of these is "feeling". It is common to hear people say, "I feel this is wrong", or, "in this particular situation, I sincerely feel this is the right thing to do".

Once four people were drinking beer - all truly felt that it was beer. However, one of the beers had cyanide. In spite of this, the person drinking it very sincerely "felt" in his heart and soul that it was beer. A few minutes later, he was very sincerely dead. Sincerity of feeling is no guarantee of right moral action.

Often "freedom" of conscience is invoked to allow a particular behaviour. This can mean freedom to do whatever we want. But are we really free to do so? Is a terrorist free to blow up 270 people over Scotland? Our freedom ends where the rights of others begin. Freedom has certain limits - it is limited by the common good of society, the well-being of each individual person. Conscience marks the limits of human freedom.

If our conscience tells us that we are free to do something against the well-being of others, then it should be questioned. Probably it is not guided by the universal principles of right and wrong, but by our own subjective feelings. We then become the maker of what is right and wrong, with no rational basis as a guide. We can make anything we want to be right. The more we want it, the greater will be the pressure to see it as right. This millennium is full of examples: slavery, genocide, apartheid, the Third Reich - to name a few.

It is not easy to resuscitate a dead conscience. We can get used to everything - a journalist can get used to concentration camps, a drug trafficker to drugs.

We need to keep our conscience alive and awake. We do this by exposing it to right ways of thinking and by cutting through bad ways of thinking. The more clever (we think) we are, the easier we can deceive ourselves. We need to look for deep answers to the fundamental questions of right and wrong. These are found in the answers to the questions of man's existence and purpose. From the end (or purpose) of man, we determine what is moral or immoral. We can cease to do this the day after we die.

Man's happiness is to be found in doing things that are right. This does not mean doing things we think are right - we have to know. Presuming things to be right can lead to problems later because conscience can accuse us. Misery comes from doing things that are wrong. We can hope that one result of this era of history will be a better understanding of the human person.

We respect the consciences of others when we respect their right to moral truth. We do not do so by presenting a series of options some less evil than others and allow them to choose, as though they were all the same. What responsible mother would do this with a child? What responsible government would do this on issues like drug abuse, genocide or racism? This way of acting would destroy rather than build consciences. In this area we cannot hide the intrinsic and undeniable ethical dimension of the medical profession.

Public confession on television to the whole world of past misdeeds has become curiously commonplace. Diana, Charles, Bill and the promise-keepers have done it - to the point of being boring. These gestures seem to convey the need of conscience to be put right, to express guilt in some external way. There could be some light here.

Rebellion against moral breakdown - through growing conscientious objection against immoral practices _ is a good sign to watch for, particularly among young people, as we approach the third millennium. It will be confirmation that man refuses to live like an animal or to treat others like one (the essence of materialism); a sign that he seeks his true dignity as a person, with an intellect and a will, and as a spiritual being who knows where he has come from, where he is going and how to get there.

The 20th century has known its human catastrophes, but among its triumphs has been the extraordinary advance of medical research and treatment. In the light of this, and even more as we look back 1000 years we cannot but applaud those who have led the way, and renew our hope at this turning point, towards the future.

If a moral revolution is to take place in society, we need to be concerned about our own consciences and to build those of the young. Moral life invites man to effect a dominion over himself which is a demand of his nature. The Shakespearean dictum, "Conscience doth make cowards of us all" [Hamlet, Act III scene I], only expresses part of the truth, namely that our conscience, at times, causes remorse, but its main purpose is to make dignified and whole persons of us all.

Fr Conor Donnelly is a medical graduate of University College Dublin, Ireland (1977). In 1981 after doctoral studies in theology in Rome and at the University of Navarre (Spain) he was ordained a priest of Opus Dei, which is a Personal Prelature of the Roman Catholic Church. He has been living and working as a priest in Singapore for the past six years. He is a member of the Ethics Committee of Mount Elizabeth Hospital.