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David Harold-Barry

## The Anvil of Conscience

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# The Anvil of Conscience

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John Henry Newman is known for many things but notable among them was his treatment of the development of doctrine and his call for an educated laity. These themes remain with us today as we battle to make sense of developments in the Church and in the world. Perhaps underpinning all that he lived and wrote was Newman's emphasis on conscience. The century in which he lived was a bridge when people finally crossed from a world of exterior authority – whether in Church or state – to one where they tested in earnest the resonance – or lack of it - between that authority and their own experience.

The twentieth century saw a flowering of conscience but also ferocious attacks on it by the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Soviet Communism, both of which aimed at subordinating every person to the perceived interests of the state. The flowering found its echo in the Vatican Council and the subsequent Catechism of the Catholic Church, which quoted Newman; 'Conscience is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representative. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.'<sup>1</sup>

Conscience is like a stream finding its way down a mountain. It rushes on until it is blocked by a rock or a mound. Angrily, it finds its way round or through. At other times it disappears in wetland or bog and is held still for a while. Then some impetus comes and it moves on until one way or another, it reaches the sea.

## CONSCIENCE IMPOSES ITSELF

Conscience is like that stream. It serves us well when we are in the flow of life but then suddenly there is a jarring, an obstacle in our path. We become frustrated. It is hard to see this as a call to reflect and maybe change direction. We may sink in the surrounding culture and simply conform so as to avoid trouble. 'Conscience

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1 The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1778

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does make cowards of us all,' says Shakespeare's Hamlet. Worst of all we can seem to lose our conscience as Hermann Göring, second in command to Hitler, seemed to do when he said, 'Hitler is my conscience'. Yet conscience won't go away and more and more people are finding the space and the courage to follow theirs, even to the extent of coming into conflict with the state - and the Church.

*Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul's encyclical of fifty years ago, which forbade methods of contraception that were seen as going against nature, was a painful moment when many Catholics felt their conscience told them one thing, while the pope told them another. It was a watershed and some Bishops' Conferences, while insisting on respect for the pope's teaching, also spoke of the primacy of conscience as enshrined in the documents of Vatican II, already referred to:

All people are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and his Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it. ... This sacred Synod likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entry into the mind at once quietly and with power.<sup>2</sup>

'The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth.' The church too was crossing the bridge and making room for individual conscience. No wonder this conciliar document had to go through six drafts and consider over 2000 proposed corrections.<sup>3</sup> It was highly uncomfortable for a church that was used to being unquestioned. Looking back we can see that the seeds of the 'crisis of authority' in the church were sown in Vatican II. And here we remind ourselves that a crisis can go either way: it can be a moment of disaster or a moment of growth. Vatican II was a moment of growth. It may have been an inevitable development but it still took courage to recognise the place of conscience in official Church documents.

We may be beginning to forget but the mind-set of both state and church before the twentieth century was one of external authority. Those in charge made the decisions with often scant reference to those they ruled. By and large we have moved, or are moving, away from this thinking with each passing day. Every decision has to resonate with the experience of the one for whom it is meant

2 Decree on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae* #1

3 John Courtney Murray SJ, 'Introduction to the Decree on Religious Freedom' in *Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter Abbot, 1966

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if it is to have any chance of acceptance. As is often said, the *experience of authority* has now to give way to the *authority of experience*.

### THE WITNESS OF THOMAS MORE

We cannot arrive at that deep inner authority, such that it governs our lives and destiny, without sustained attentive preparation. Thomas More's decision to oppose Henry VIII was not lightly made. It was a dramatic demonstration of the authority of conscience over all other considerations. In Robert Bolt's play about More, *A Man for All Seasons*, there is constant reference to it. When the Duke of Norfolk tries to get Thomas to go along with those who accepted the king as head of the Church he says to Thomas, almost in despair;

Why can't you do as I did, and come with us, for friendship's sake?

Thomas turns on him;

Oh yes! And when we die, and you are sent to heaven for doing your conscience and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me - for friendship's sake?

The drama ends with the beheading of Thomas, who does not budge from his conscience while most of England follow the king's command and swear the oath recognising him as head of the Church.

### AND OF HANS AND SOPHIE

If this contest of wills five hundred years ago seems remote there is an equally powerful example in the twentieth century. In 1942 Hitler had not yet suffered any major defeat and held nearly all Germany in psychological as well as physical thrall. Few dared to question his actions but a tiny group of students in Munich, led by Hans and Sophie Scholl started a clandestine and highly dangerous campaign of protest<sup>4</sup> producing, and secretly distributing, leaflets denouncing Hitler and all he stood for. They were eventually caught and, like More, beheaded.

What is striking in the story of the Scholls and their friends was the intense intellectual and spiritual preparation that preceded it. Under the influence of their teachers these young people absorbed the ideas of Augustine, Pascal, Claudel and especially Newman.

4 Paul Shrimpton, *Conscience before Conformity, Hans and Sophie Scholl and the White Rose resistance in Nazi Germany*, Gracewing, 2018.

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The Nazis themselves were astonished when they eventually caught up with them to discover that what they thought was a nationwide opposition movement was driven by two young people hardly out of their teens. Hans (24) and Sophie (21) were calm, clear and unyielding to self-pity or efforts to escape their sentence. As her trial ended Sophie told the judges, “You know the war is lost. Why don’t you have the courage to face it?”<sup>5</sup>

So, pondering in awe that moment in 1943 when Sophie and Hans submitted to the guillotine, we recall that a process of personal formation preceded it. Perhaps we are inclined to judge young people today, wired to their mobiles, as unreflective and dependent on the constant stimulus of interminable messaging? Do they read challenging authors? Do they discuss ideas in depth with their friends? Do they search to form a coherent meaningful attitude towards the world? Woe to the one who judges! While the dominant culture may sweep many along in its tsunami force, pandering to self-interest, heaven knows how many Hans and Sophies there are among them quietly gathering their thoughts and forming a desire to protest.

## THE LION OF MÜNSTER AND THE VOICE OF NEWMAN

The formation of conscience requires not only understanding about how it works; it also needs witnesses. The young students of Munich had such a witness in the towering figure of Count Clemens von Galen, the Catholic bishop of Münster, who in July 1941, began to speak out against the regime. It was the first time in the war the Nazis were challenged in public, and it caused a sensation.

Become hard! Remain firm! At this moment we are the anvil rather than the hammer. Other men, mostly strangers and renegades, are hammering us, seeking by violent means to bend our nation, ourselves and our young people aside from their correct relationship with God.<sup>6</sup>

Von Galen’s sermons were printed and disseminated secretly earning him the title of the ‘Lion of Münster’.

In May, that year, Sophie, wanting to share her enthusiasm for Newman with her boyfriend, Fritz Hartnagel, who was departing for service in the army in Russia, gave him a present of two volumes of his sermons. He later wrote back to her that he had absorbed every line like ‘drops of precious wine.’ ‘Conscience gives us the capacity to distinguish between Good and Evil,’ he wrote. It is

5 Ibid, p 254

6 Ibid, p 80

amazing to think of this young German soldier on the Russian front reading a sermon on ‘The Testimony of Conscience’, preached by John Henry Newman in 1838 at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford. It is eloquent testimony to how far the group of friends had travelled in their life in the Spirit. Fritz finished his letter to Sophie: ‘We must submit our reason to these mysteries, and confess the faith’ which Newman called, ‘the submission of the intellect to mystery.’<sup>7</sup>

CONSCIENCE AS AN ANVIL

Bishop von Galen spoke of being an anvil, being hard. The story of Hans and Sophie and their friends tells us this is a process of self-education, a disciplined search into the interior workings of a person’s heart and mind. ‘If you knew the gift of God,’ Jesus says to the Samaritan woman. We do not make this inward journey on our own. The growth and flowering of conscience until it becomes ‘hard’ is our personal journey but it is one we are assisted to make all the way by witnesses and teachers.

What should we be ‘hard’ about today? In the swirling criticism of the Catholic Church, her bishops, priests and religious, we are called to be hard and clear about what is eternal in contrast to what is passing. In the apathy and self-serving of those who ignore global warming, in the glitzy culture of instant gratification in some of the media and advertising and in much lazy acquiescence in the populist takeovers of government in many developed countries today, we are called to be hard and ‘push back.’

There are signs that this is happening. Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si*, ‘There is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having bravely shouldered its grave responsibilities.’<sup>8</sup> And the media may pander to our tastes but it also relentlessly exposes our failures and hypocrisies. In Ireland over the past thirty years, many have been vexed by the hounding of bishops, priests and religious but in calmer moments we can see that all the turmoil is in large part due to ordinary people finding a resonance in their conscience with what the media has revealed.

In the future it will become harder for leaders in any sphere to find unquestioning acquiescence among those who follow. Von Galen’s anvil will not yield and the hammer will eventually grow weary. But in the meantime we need our Thomas Mores, our Clemens von Galens and our Scholls to make a stand. We also need the enduring commitment of obscure Therasas of Lisieux and world renowned Therasas of Calcutta.

7 Quoted in *Conscience*, p170

8 *Laudato Si*, #165