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**THE MORAL LAW, CONSCIENCE, AND
THE SACRED LITURGY**

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Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2010 Christmas Address to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate of Vatican City State, spoke clearly and strongly about the profoundly disordered moral state in which our world finds itself, today. He spoke about the grave evils of our time, for example, the sexual abuse of minors by the clergy, the marketing of child pornography, sexual tourism, and the deadly abuse of drugs. We think also of other most grave evils which have sadly become commonplace in our culture: procured abortion, the artificial generation of human life, euthanasia, and the denial of the freedom to act in accord with a rightly-formed conscience.

Regarding the grave evils which beset the world, in our day, Pope Benedict XVI declared that they are all signs of “the tyranny of mammon which perverts mankind” and that they result from “a fatal misunderstanding of freedom which actually undermines man’s freedom and ultimately destroys it.”¹ They are manifestations, to be sure, of a way of

¹ “... della dittatura di mammona che perverte l’uomo” ... “un fatale fraintendimento della libertà, in cui proprio la libertà dell’uomo viene minata e alla fine annullata del tutto.” Benedictus PP. XVI, Allocutio “Omina Nativitatis novique Anni Curiae Romanae significantur.” 20 Decembris 2010, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 103 (2011), 36 [Hereafter, CG].

living, to use the words of Pope Saint John Paul II, “as if God did not exist.”²

Reflecting on the grave evils which are destroying us as individuals and as a society, and which have generated a culture marked predominantly by violence and death, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that, if we, with the help of God’s grace, are to overcome the grave evils of our time, “we must turn our attention to their ideological foundations.”³ He then identified directly and unequivocally the ideology which fosters these evils: a perversion of *ethos*, of the moral norm, which has even entered into the thinking of some theologians in the Church.

Referring to one of the more shocking manifestations of the ideology, namely, the so-called moral teaching that the sexual abuse of children by adults is actually good for the children and for the adults, he declared:

It was maintained – even within the realm of Catholic theology – that there is no such thing as evil in itself or good in itself. There is only a “better than” and a “worse than”. Nothing is good or bad in itself. Everything depends on the circumstances and on the end in view. Anything can be good or also bad, depending upon purposes and circumstances. Morality is replaced by a calculus of consequences, and in the process

English translation: Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate,” *L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English* (22-29 December 2010), p. 13 [Hereafter, CGEng].

² “... ‘etsi Deus non daretur.’” Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Adhortatio Apostolica Post-Synodalis *Christifideles Laici*, “De vocatione et missione laicorum in Ecclesia et in mundo,” 30 Decembris 1988, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 81 (1989), 454, n. 34. [CL]. English translation: Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, “On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World,” 30 December 1988 (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), p. 95, no. 34. [CLEng].

³ “...dobbiamo gettare uno sguardo sui loro fondamenti ideologici.” CG, 36. English translation: CGEng, p. 13.

it ceases to exist.⁴

Pope Benedict XVI describes a moral relativism, called proportionalism or consequentialism in contemporary moral theology, which has generated profound confusion and outright error regarding the most fundamental truths of the moral law. It has led to a situation in which morality itself indeed, to use his words, “ceases to exist.” If, therefore, the irreplaceable moral order, which is the way of our freedom and happiness, is to be restored, we must address with clarity and steadfastness the error of moral relativism, proportionalism and consequentialism, which permeates our culture and has also entered, as the Holy Father reminds us, into the Church.

To confront the ideology, Pope Benedict XVI has urged us to study anew the teaching of his predecessor, Pope Saint John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, “On the Fundamentals of the Church’s Moral Teaching.”⁵ In *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “indicated with prophetic force, in the great rational tradition of Christian *ethos*, the essential and permanent foundations of moral action.”⁶ Reminding us of the need to form our consciences, in accord with the moral teaching of the Church, our Holy Father also reminded us of “our responsibility to make these criteria [these

moral foundations] audible and intelligible once more for people today as paths of true humanity, in the context of our paramount concern for mankind.”⁷

Reason and Faith in the Knowledge of Objective Moral Principles

Later, in the same Christmas Address, Pope Benedict XVI recalled his “encounter with the world of culture in Westminster Hall,”⁸ during his pastoral visit to the United Kingdom in September of 2010, during which he reflected “on the proper place of religious belief within the political process.”⁹ Taking inspiration from the example of Saint Thomas More, he addressed directly “the ethical foundations of civil discourse.”¹⁰ As a service to culture, in general, he set forth the Catholic understanding of the matter with these words:

The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help

⁴ “Si asseriva – persino nell’ambito della teologia cattolica – che non esisterebbero né il male in sé, né il bene in sé. Esisterebbe soltanto un «meglio di» e un «peggio di». Niente sarebbe in se stesso bene o male. Tutto dipenderebbe dalle circostanze e dal fine inteso. A seconda degli scopi e delle circostanze, tutto potrebbe essere bene o anche male. La morale viene sostituita da un calcolo delle conseguenze e con ciò cessa di esistere. CG, 33. English translation: CGEng, p. 13.

⁵ Cf. Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Litterae Encyclicae Veritatis Splendor*, “De quibusdam quaestionibus fundamentalibus doctrinae moralis Ecclesiae,” 6 Augusti 1993, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 85 (1993), 1133-1228. English translation: Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, “On the Fundamentals of the Church’s Moral Teaching,” 6 August 1993 (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

⁶ “... indicò con forza profetica nella grande tradizione razionale dell’*ethos* Cristiano le basi essenziali e permanenti dell’agire morale.” CG, 37. English translation: CGE, p. 13.

⁷ “... nostra responsabilità rendere nuovamente udibili e comprensibili tra gli uomini questi criteri come vie della vera umanità, nel contesto della preoccupazione per l’uomo, nella quale siamo immerse.” Ibid. English translation: Ibid.

⁸ “... incontro con il mondo della cultura nella Westminster Hall.” CG, 38. English translation: CGEng, p. 13.

⁹ Benedictus PP. XVI, *Allocutio “Iter Apostolicum Summi Pontificis in Regnum Unitum: Londinii in Aula Vestmonasteriensis colloquium Benedicti XVI cum primoribus Societatis Civilis; cum doctis vivis culturae, scientiis et operum conduction deditis; cum Corpore Legatorum et Religiosis Auctoritatibus,”* 17 Septembris 2010, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 102 (2010), 635.

¹⁰ Ibid., 636.

purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.¹¹

Pope Benedict XVI noted that the role of religion in public discourse “is not always welcomed,” for various reasons which can also include “distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism.”¹²

He observed, however, that such distortions do not justify the exclusion of religion from public discourse, for “reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take account of the dignity of the human person.”¹³ What remains necessary and true is the right relationship of faith and reason. Pope Benedict XVI concludes:

This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.¹⁴

Religion, he continued, “is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation.”¹⁵ In the light of the irreplaceable role of religion in public life, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his “concern at the increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity, that is taking place in some quarters, even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance.”¹⁶

He then gives a telling description of some of the more troubling manifestations of the effort to alienate religion from the public forum. His words which I now quote shed light on the absurdity and indeed moral perversity of a public order which fails to respect the proper role of religion:

There are those who would advocate that the

voice of religion be silenced, or at least relegated to the purely private sphere. There are those who argue that the public celebration of festivals such as Christmas should be discouraged, in the questionable belief that it might somehow offend those of other religions or none. And there are those who argue – paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination – that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.¹⁷

Pope Benedict concluded with an invitation to safeguard and foster the right relationship of faith and reason, which is essential to the pursuit of the common good, of the good of society.

In the 2010 Christmas Address, he concluded his reference to his speech in Westminster Hall with these urgent words:

This fundamental [moral] consensus derived from the Christian heritage is at risk wherever its place, the place of moral reasoning, is taken by the purely instrumental rationality of which I spoke earlier. In reality, this makes reason blind to what is essential. To resist this eclipse of reason and to preserve its capacity for seeing the essential, for seeing God and man, for seeing what is good and what is true, is the common interest that must unite all people of good will. The very future of the world is at stake.¹⁸

¹¹ Ibid., 636-637.

¹² Ibid., 637.

¹³ Ibid., 637.

¹⁴ Ibid., 637.

¹⁵ Ibid., 637.

¹⁶ Ibid., 637.

¹⁷ Ibid., 637.

¹⁸ “Questo consenso di fondo proveniente dal patrimonio Cristiano è in pericolo là dove al suo posto, al posto della ragione morale, subentra la mere razionalità finalistica di cui ho parlato poco fa. Questo è in realtà un accecamento della ragione per ciò che è essenziale. Combattere contro questo accecamento della ragione e conservarle la capacità di vedere l’essenziale, di vedere Dio e l’uomo, ciò che è buono e ciò che è vero, è l’interesse commune che deve unire tutti gli uomini

There can be no question of the urgency with which Pope Benedict XVI called the faithful and all persons of good will to reverse the decline of western Christian culture by engaging public discourse with the fundamental truths of the moral law, as taught to us by reason and by our Catholic faith.

In his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the same concern precisely in terms of human development, indicating the harm done to society, in general, when religion is excluded from public discourse. He described the deleterious societal effect of two extremes, the exclusion of religion and religious fundamentalism, in these words:

The exclusion of religion from the public square – and, at the other extreme, religious fundamentalism – hinders an encounter between persons and their collaboration for the progress of humanity. Public life is sapped of its motivation and politics takes on a domineering and aggressive character. Human rights risk being ignored either because they are robbed of their transcendent foundation or because personal freedom is not acknowledged. Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. *Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith*: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, *religion always needs to be purified by reason* in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development.¹⁹

di buona volontà. È in gioco il futuro del mondo.” CG, 39. English translation: CGEng, p. 14.

¹⁹ “Tum exclusio religionis ex ambitu politico, tum quoque fundamentalismus religiosus, consortionem inter personas impediunt earumque consociatam operam ad humanitatem provehendam. Vita publica rationum cumulo extenuatur et res politica pugnacem vultum adhibet. Iura humana in periculo versantur ne observentur, quia suo transcendentis fundamento orbantur vel humana non agnoscitur libertas. In laicismo et

To the degree that we restore respect for the essential relationship between faith and reason, to that degree we are filled with hope for the future of a culture which, otherwise, can only be in decline.

Making pilgrimage to the ancient shrine of Saint James the Greater at Compostela in Spain, in November of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI urged Europeans to recognize the great gift of God’s love in the world, in Jesus Christ, and to follow Christ in holiness of life. His words to the faithful of Europe, who have grown so forgetful of God and even hostile to His Law, apply also to other dechristianized nations like our own United States of America. His words are further illuminated by the context of his pilgrimage, for the very purpose of a pilgrimage is to open our eyes to the great mystery of God’s love in our lives, that is, to open our eyes to see the extraordinary nature of ordinary living. Let us listen to the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

God is the origin of our being and the foundation and apex of our freedom, not its opponent. How can mortal man build a firm foundation and how can the sinner be reconciled with himself? How can it be that there is public silence with regard to the first and essential reality of human life? How can what is most decisive in life be confined to the purely private sphere or banished to the shadows? We cannot live in darkness, without seeing the light of the sun. How is it then that God, who is the light of every

fundamentalismo facultas amittitur frugiferi colloquii atque efficacis cooperationis inter rationem et religiosam fidem. *Ratio semper fide est purificanda*, quod etiam de politica ratione est dicendum, quae non debet putare se omnipotentem esse. *Religio quoque semper ratione est purificanda* ut suum authenticum humanum vultum demonstret. Huius dialogi abruptio perquam onerosum erga humanitatis progressionem secum fert pretium.” Benedictus PP. XVI, Litterae Encyclicae *Caritas in Veritate*, “De humana integra progressionem in caritate veritateque,” 29 Iunii 2009, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 101 (2009), 692, n. 56 [Hereafter, CV]. English translation: Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, “On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth,” 29 June 2009, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009, p. 109, no. 56 [Hereafter, CVEng].

mind, the power of every will and the magnet of every heart, be denied the right to propose the light that dissipates all darkness? This is why we need to hear God once again under the skies of Europe; may this holy word not be spoken in vain, and may it not be put at the service of purposes other than its own. It needs to be spoken in a holy way. And we must hear it in this way in ordinary life, in the silence of work, in brotherly love and in the difficulties that the years bring on.²⁰

The words of Pope Benedict XVI make clear the inherent dynamism of the life of the Holy Spirit within us, leading us to give witness to mystery of God's love in our lives and so to convert our own lives more fully to Christ and to transform our world.

It is instructive to note that Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, made special reference to Pope Paul VI's Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, "On the Proper Regulation of the Propagation of Offspring," underscoring its importance "for delineating the *fully human meaning of the development that the Church*

proposes."²¹ Pope Benedict XVI made clear that the teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is not simply a matter of "individual morality," declaring:

Humanae vitae indicates the *strong links between life ethics and social ethics*, ushering in a new area of magisterial teaching that has gradually been articulated in a series of documents, most recently John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*.²²

Pope Benedict XVI reminded us of the essential part which a right understanding of our sexuality has in the true human development which is holiness of life.

In treating the whole question of procreation, Pope Benedict XVI underscored the critical nature of the right understanding of human sexuality, marriage and the family. He wrote:

The Church, in her concern for man's authentic development, urges him to have full respect for human goods in the exercise of his sexuality. It cannot be reduced merely to pleasure or entertainment, nor can sex education be reduced to technical instruction aimed solely at protecting the interested parties from possible disease or the "risk" of procreation. This would be to impoverish and disregard the deeper meaning of sexuality, a meaning which needs to be acknowledged and responsibly appropriated not only by individuals but also by the community.²³

²⁰ "Dios es el origen de nuestro ser y cimiento y cúspide de nuestra libertad: no su oponente. ¿Cómo el hombre mortal se va a fundar a sí mismo y cómo el hombre pecador se va reconciliar a sí mismo? ¿Cómo es posible que se haya hecho silencio público sobre la realidad primera y esencial de la vida humana? ¿Cómo lo más determinante de ella puede ser recluso en la mera intimidad o remitido a la penumbra? Los hombres no podemos vivir a oscuras, sin ver la luz del sol. Y, entonces, ¿cómo es posible que se le niegue a Dios, sol de las inteligencias, fuerza de las voluntades e imán de nuestros corazones, el derecho de proponer esa luz que disipa toda tiniebla? Por eso, es necesario que Dios vuelva a resonar gozosamente bajo los cielos de Europa; que esa palabra santa no se pronuncie jamás en vano; que no se pervierta haciéndola servir a fines que le son impropios. Es menester que se profiera santamente. Es necesario que la percibamos así en la vida de cada día, en el silencio del trabajo, en el amor fraterno y en las dificultades que los años traen consigo." Benedictus PP. XVI, Homilia, "In eucharistica celebratione sacro Compostellano anno recurrente," 6 Novembris 2010, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 102 (2010), 881-882. English translation: *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 10 November 2010, pp. 5 and 8.

²¹ "... ut progressionis prorsus humana significatio describatur, quam Ecclesia proponit." CV, 651, n. 15. English translation: CVEng, p. 20, no. 15.

²² "Litterae encyclicae «*Humanae vitae*» solida vincula designant, quae inter vitae ethicam et ethicam socialem intercedunt, magistrare quoddam insinuantes argumentum, quod gradatim variis in documentis auctum est, novissime in Ioannis Pauli II Litteris encyclicis *Evangelium vitae*." CV, 651, n. 15. English translation: CVEng, p. 21, no. 15

²³ "Ecclesia, cui cordi est verus hominis progressus, monet eum ad plenam valorum observantiam, in sexualitate quoque exercenda: quae ad meram rem hedonisticam ludicramque redigi non potest, sicut educatio sexualis in technicam institutionem coartari non potest, si tantum cura habeatur eos quorum interest arcendi a quodam contagio vel a generandi

He reminds us of the essential part which a right understanding of our sexuality has in true human development.

The restoration of the respect for the integrity of the conjugal act is essential to the future of western culture, the advancement of a culture of life. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, it is necessary “once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person.”²⁴ Correspondingly, he notes that “States are called to *enact policies promoting the centrality and integrity of the family* founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character.”²⁵

Conscience, the Infallible Guide to Truth

The light of God shines in our minds and hearts by means of our conscience. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the conscience with these words:

Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which

«periculo». Hoc modo pauperior fieret et altus sexualitatis sensus extenuaretur, qui e contra agnosci et accipi debet cum responsalitate tam singularum personarum quam communitatis.” CV, 680, n. 44. English translation: CVEng, pp. 73-74, no. 44.

²⁴ “... novis generationibus adhuc proponendi pulchritudinem familiae et matrimonii, congruentiam huiusmodi institutionum cum altioribus postulatis cordis dignitatisque personae.” CV, 681, n. 44. English translation: CVEng, p. 75, n. 44.

²⁵ “Status vocantur ad *normas politicas edendas, praeeminentiam integritatemque familiae promoventes, quae matrimonio nititur unius viri uniusque mulieris, quaeque exstat prima vitalisque societatis cellula, atque in se recipit etiam quaestiones oeconomicas et nummarias, quod ad ipsius necessitudinis indolem attinet.*” CV, 681, n.44. English translation: CVEng, p. 75, no. 44.

the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.²⁶

Through the conscience, we communicate with God Who is the fullness of truth, beauty and goodness. The Being of God is Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Conscience is a privileged place of our participation in the Being of God.

It is the conscience, the voice of God, speaking to our souls, which is, in the words of the Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, “the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.”²⁷ As such, the conscience is ever attuned to Christ Himself Who instructs and informs it through His Vicar, the Roman Pontiff, and the Bishops in communion with the Roman Pontiff. Cardinal Newman observed that 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 representatives.”²⁸

Today, we must be attentive to a false notion of conscience, which would actually use the conscience to justify sinful acts, to betray our call to holiness. In the earlier-mentioned 2010 Christmas Address, Pope Benedict XVI reflected, at some length, on the notion of conscience in the writings of Cardinal Newman, contrasting it with a false notion of conscience, which is pervasive in our culture.

The Holy Father described the difference of the Church’s understanding of conscience, as faithfully and brilliantly taught by Cardinal Newman, with these words:

In modern thinking, the word “conscience” signifies that for moral and religious questions, it is the subjective dimension, the individual, that constitutes the final authority for decision. The world is divided into the realms of the objective and the subjective.

²⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1777.

²⁷ John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II*, London: Longmans Green, 1885, p. 248. Quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778.

²⁸ Ibid.

To the objective realm belong things that can be calculated and verified by experiment. Religion and morals fall outside the scope of these methods and are therefore considered to lie within the subjective realm. Here, it is said, there are in the final analysis no objective criteria. The ultimate instance that can decide here is therefore the subject alone, and precisely this is what the word “conscience” expresses: in this realm only the individual, with his intuitions and experiences, can decide. Newman’s understanding of conscience is diametrically opposed to this. For him, “conscience” means man’s capacity for truth: the capacity to recognize precisely in the decision-making areas of his life – religion and morals – a truth, *the* truth. At the same time, conscience – man’s capacity to recognize truth – thereby imposes on him the obligation to set out along the path towards truth, to seek it and to submit to it wherever he finds it. Conscience is both capacity for truth and obedience to the truth which manifests itself to anyone who seeks it with an open heart.²⁹

Conscience, therefore, does not set each of us apart as an arbiter of what is right and good, but unites us in the pursuit of the one truth, ultimately Our Lord Jesus Christ Who is the only arbiter of the right and good, so that our thoughts, words and actions put that truth into practice.

In the same Christmas discourse, Pope Benedict XVI clarified an often misunderstood passage of Blessed Cardinal Newman, which is used, in fact, to promote the erroneous subjective notion of conscience. He observed:

In support of the claim that Newman’s concept of conscience matched the modern subjective understanding, people often quote a letter in which he said – should he have to propose a toast – that he would drink first to conscience and then to the Pope. But in this statement, “conscience” does not signify the ultimately binding quality of subjective intuition. It is an expression of the accessibility and the binding force of truth: on this its primacy is based. The second toast can be addressed to the Pope because it is his task to demand obedience to the truth.³⁰

In other words, there can never be a contrast between what the conscience demands of us and what the truth of the faith, as enunciated by the Roman Pontiff, demands of us. The conscience, in fact, is drawing us into an ever deeper understanding of the truth and adherence to it in our thoughts, words and actions.

²⁹ “Nel pensiero moderno, la parola «coscienza» significa che in materia di morale e di religione, la dimensione soggettiva, l’individuo, costituisce l’ultima istanza della decisione. Il mondo viene diviso negli ambiti dell’oggettivo e del soggettivo. All’oggettivo appartengono le cose che si possono calcolare e verificare mediante l’esperienza. La religione e la morale sono sottratte a questi metodi e perciò sono considerate come ambito del soggettivo. Qui non esisterebbero, in ultima analisi, dei criteri oggettivi. L’ultima istanza che qui può decidere sarebbe pertanto solo il soggetto, e con la parola «coscienza» si esprime, appunto, questo: in questo ambito può decidere solo il singolo, l’individuo con le sue intuizioni ed esperienze. La concezione che Newman ha della coscienza è diametralmente opposta. Per lui «coscienza» significa la capacità di verità dell’uomo: la capacità di riconoscere proprio negli ambiti decisivi della sua esistenza – religione e morale – una verità, *la* verità. La coscienza, la capacità dell’uomo di riconoscere la verità, gli impone con ciò, al tempo stesso, il dovere di incamminarsi verso la verità, di cercarla e di sottomettersi ad essa laddove la incontra. Coscienza è capacità di verità e obbedienza nei confronti della verità, che

si mostra all’uomo che cerca col cuore aperto.” CG, 36. English translation: CGEng, p. 14.

³⁰ “Per poter asserire l’identità tra il concetto che Newman aveva della coscienza e la moderna comprensione soggettiva della coscienza, si ama far riferimento alla sua parola secondo cui egli – nel caso avesse dovuto fare un brindisi – avrebbe brindato prima alla coscienza e poi al Papa. Ma in questa affermazione, “coscienza” non significa l’ultima obbligatorietà dell’intuizione soggettiva. È espressione dell’accessibilità e della forza vincolante della verità: in ciò si fonda il suo primato. Al Papa può essere dedicato il secondo brindisi, perché è compito suo esigere l’obbedienza nei confronti della verità.” CG, 37. English translation: CGEng, p. 14.

Natural Law and the Formation of the Conscience in the Family

So often, today, a notion of tolerance of ways of thinking and acting contrary to the moral law seems to be the interpretative key for moral action among many Christians. This notion is not securely grounded in the moral tradition, yet it tends to dominate our approach to the extent that we end up claiming to be Christian while tolerating ways of thinking and acting which are diametrically opposed to the moral law revealed to us in nature and in the Magisterium, beginning with the Sacred Scriptures. The approach, at times, becomes so relativistic and subjective that we do not even observe the fundamental logical principle of non-contradiction, that is, that a thing cannot both be and not be in the same respect at the same time. In other words, certain actions cannot, at the same time and in the same respect, be both true to the moral law and not true to it.

In fact, charity alone must be the interpretative key of our thoughts and actions. In the context of charity, tolerance means unconditional love of the person who is involved in evil but firm abhorrence of the evil into which the person has fallen.

In his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI takes up the question of the common good which, in his words, “is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it.”³¹ Dedication to the common good, as Pope Benedict XVI makes clear, is an obligation imposed by both justice and charity. He concludes: “The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them.”³²

³¹ “Non ... per se ipsum conquisitum, sed personarum gratia, quae communitatem socialem participant atque in ea tantum reapse et efficaciter bonum suum consequi possunt.” CV, 645, n. 7. English translation: CVEng, p. 9, no. 7.

³² “Eo efficacius proximus amatur, quo magis bonum commune colitur, quod veris necessitatibus occurrat.” CV, 645, n. 7. English translation: CVE, p. 10, no. 7.

The thoroughly galvanized anti-life and anti-family agenda of our time advances, in large part, because of a lack of attention to events and sound knowledge to interpret events among the general public. The pervasive mass media, the principal promoter of the agenda, confuse and corrupt minds and hearts, and dull consciences to the law written by God upon every human heart. A new evangelization of the family, of the Church and of society should be marked by a profound confidence in the human heart upon which the moral law has been inscribed. At the same time, it should be ready to refute the false claim that unconditional respect for the inviolable dignity of innocent human life and for the integrity of the conjugal union is merely a confessional matter and to illustrate how it is at the very foundation of the common good.

The Beauty of a Holy Life

The way leading to freedom and happiness is, for each of us, holiness of life, in accord with our state in life. Pope Saint John Paul II, in fact, cast the entire pastoral plan for the Church in terms of holiness. He explained himself thus:

In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethics and a shallow religiosity. To ask catechumens: “Do you wish to receive Baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?” It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (*Mt 5:48*).³³

³³ “Re quidem vera, si pastoralis ordinatio sub signo sanctitatis statuitur, aliquid compluribus cum consecrariis decernitur. Inde enim in primis firma aperitur sententia: si vera est Baptismus ingressio in Dei sanctitatem per insertionem in Christum ipsum necnon Spiritus eius per inhabitationem, quaedam repugnantia est contentum esse mediocri vita, quae

Pope John Paul II continued, making reference to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, by reminding us that “this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few ‘uncommon heroes’ of holiness.”³⁴

Pope John Paul II taught us the extraordinary nature of our ordinary life, because it is lived in Christ and, therefore, produces in us the incomparable beauty of holiness. He declared:

The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual. I thank the Lord that in these years he has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.³⁵

ad normam transigitur ethnicae doctrinae minimum solum poscentis ac religionis superficiem tantum tangentis. Ex catechumeno quaerere: «Vis baptizari?» eodem tempore est petere: «Vis sanctificari?». Idem valet ac deponere eius in via extremum Sermonis Montani principium: «Estote ergo vos perfecti, sicut Pater vester caelestis perfectus est» (Mt 5, 48).” Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Epistula Apostolica *Novo millennio ineunte*, “Magni Iubilaei anni MM sub exitum,” 6 Ianuarii 2001, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 93 (2001), 288, n. 31. [NMI]. English translation: Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, “At the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000,” 6 January 2001 (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2001) p. 43, no. 31. [NMIEng].

³⁴ “... optima haec perfectionis species non ita est iudicanda quasi si genus quoddam secum importet vitae extraordinariae quam soli aliqui sanctitatis «gigantes» traducere possint.” NMI, 288, n. 31. English translation: NMIEng, p. 43, no. 31.

³⁵ “Multiplices enim sanctitatis existunt viae atque cuiusque congruunt cum vocatione. Grates Domino referimus Nobis quod concessit his proximis annis tot christianos et christianas inter beatos adnumerare ac sanctos, ex quibus plures laici sanctimoniam sunt communissimis in vitae condicionibus adsecuti. Omnibus ergo tempus est iterum firmiter hunc proponere «superiorem modum» ordinariae vitae christianae: ad hanc namque metam conducere debet omnis vita ecclesialis communitatis ac familiarum christianarum.” NMI, 288, n. 32. English translation: NMIEng, p. 43, no. 32.

Seeing in us the daily conversion of life by which we strive to meet the high standard of holiness, the “*high standard of ordinary Christian living*,” our brothers and sisters will discover the great beauty of their own ordinary life in which God daily showers upon them his immeasurable and ceaseless love, calling them to holiness of life in Christ, His only-begotten Son. That beauty is most evident in our participation in the Sacred Liturgy.

Referring to the new evangelization of our culture, Pope Saint John Paul II also observed that clearly, the “mending of the Christian fabric of society” can only come about by the remaking of “the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community,” beginning with the individual in his family, at home.³⁶ The remaking of “the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community” has its inspiration and direction in the Sacred Liturgy which, at the same time, reflects the unity which necessarily marks the life of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Writing about our participation in the Sacred Liturgy, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

This *oratio* – the Eucharistic Prayer, the “Canon” – is really more than speech; it is *actio* in the highest sense of the word. For what happens in it is that the human *actio* (as performed hitherto by the priests in the various religions of the world) steps back and makes way for the *actio divina*, the action of God. In this *oratio* the priest speaks with the I of the Lord – “This is my Body”, “This is my Blood.” He knows that he is not now speaking from his own resources but in virtue of the Sacrament that he has received, he has become the voice of Someone Else, who is now speaking and acting. This action of God, which takes place through human speech, is the real “action” for which all of creation is in expectation. The elements of the earth are

³⁶ “... consortium humanum spiritu christiano ubique denuo imbuendum est...*christianus communitatum ipsarum ecclesialium contextus*.” CL, 455, n. 34. English translation: CLEng, p. 95, no. 34.

transubstantiated, pulled, so to speak, from their creaturely anchorage, grasped at the deepest ground of their being, and changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. The New Heaven and the New Earth are anticipated. The real “action” in the liturgy in which we are all supposed to participate is the action of God himself. This is what is new and distinctive about the Christian liturgy: God himself acts and does what is essential. He inaugurates the new creation, makes himself accessible to us, so that, through the things of the earth, through our gifts, we can communicate with him in a personal way. But how can we participate, have a part in this action? Are not God and man completely incommensurable? Can man, the finite and sinful one, cooperate with God, the Infinite and Holy One? Yes, he can, precisely because God himself has become man, become body, and here, again and again, he comes through his body to us who live in the body. The whole event of the Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, and Second Coming is present as the way by which God draws man into cooperation with himself. As we have seen, this is expressed in the liturgy in the fact that the petition for acceptance is part of the *oratio*. True, the Sacrifice of the Logos is accepted already and forever. But we must still pray for it to become *our* sacrifice, that we ourselves, as we said, may be transformed into the Logos (*logisiert*), conformed to the Logos, and so be made the true Body of Christ. This is the issue, and that is what we have to pray for. The petition itself is a way into the Incarnation and the Resurrection, the path that we take in the wayfaring state of our existence... In the words of St. Paul, it is a question of being “united to the Lord” and thus becoming “one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:17). The point is that, ultimately, the difference between the *actio Christi* and our own action is done away with. There is only *one* action, which is at the same time his and

ours – ours because we have become “one body and one spirit” with him. The uniqueness of the Eucharistic liturgy lies precisely in the fact that God himself is acting and that we are drawn into that action of God. Everything else is, therefore, secondary.³⁷

³⁷ “Diese oratio – das eucharistische Hochgebet, der »Kanon« – ist wirklich mehr als Rede, is actio im höchsten Sinn. Denn darin geschieht es, dass die menschliche actio (wie sie bisher von den Priestern in den verschiedenen Religionen geübt worden war) zurücktritt und Raum gibt für die actio divina, das Handeln Gottes. In dieser oratio spricht der Priester mit dem Ich des Herrn – »das ist mein Leib«, »das ist mein Blut« – in dem Wissen, dass er nun nicht mehr aus Eigenem redet, sondern kraft des Sakraments, das er empfangen hat, Stimme des anderen wird, der nun redet, handelt. Dieses Handeln Gottes, das sich durch menschliches Reden hindurch vollzieht, ist die eigentliche »Aktion«, auf die alle Schöpfung wartet: Die Elemente der Erde werden um-substanziert, sozusagen aus ihrer kreatürlichen Verankerung herausgerissen, im tiefsten Grund ihres Seins erfasst und umgewandelt in Leib und Blut des Herrn. Der neue Himmel und die neue Erde werden antizipiert. Die eigentliche »Aktion« in der Liturgie, an der wir alle teilhaben sollen, ist Handeln Gottes selbst. Das ist das Neue und Besondere der christlichen Liturgie, das Gott selber handelt und dass er das Wesentliche tut: die neue Schöpfung heraufführt, sich selbst zugänglich macht, so dass wir mit ihm selber ganz persönlich, durch die Dinge der Erde, durch unsere Gaben hindurch kommunizieren können. Aber wie können wir denn an dieser Aktion teilhaben? Sind nicht Gott und Mensch völlig inkommensurabel? Kann der Mensch, der endliche und sündige, mit Gott, dem Unendlichen und Heiligen, kooperieren? Nun, er kann es eben dadurch, dass Gott selbst Mensch wurde, dass er Leib wurde und hier immer wieder neu durch seinen Leib auf uns zugeht, die wir im Leibe leben. Das ganze Ereignis von Inkarnation, Kreuz, Auferstehung, Wiederkunft ist gegenwärtig als die Form, wie Gott den Menschen in die Kooperation mit sich selbst hineinzieht. In der Liturgie drückt sich das, wie wir schon gesehen haben, darin aus, dass zur oratio die Annahmehitte gehört. Gewiss, das Opfer des Logos *ist* immer schon angenommen. Aber wir müssen darum bitten, dass es *unser* Opfer werde, dass wir selbst, wie wir sagten, »logisiert«, logos-gemäß und so wahrer Leib Christi werden: Darum geht es. Und das muss erbetet werden. Diese Bitte selbst ist ein Weg, ein Unterwegssein unserer Existenz in die Inkarnation und in die Auferstehung hinein... Für uns alle geht es gemäß dem Wort aus 1 Kor 6, 17 darum, »dem Herrn anzuhängen und so eine einzige pneumatische Existenz mit ihm zu werden«. Es geht darum, dass letztlich der Unterschied zwischen der actio Christi und der unseren aufgehoben werde. Dass es nur noch eine *actio*

The objective reality of the Sacred Liturgy makes it the most perfect earthly encounter with God, the All-Beautiful, and, therefore everything about the Sacred Liturgy must reflect the incomparable beauty of the objective reality of the meeting of heaven and earth. At the same time, the Christian most perfectly sees the reflection of the incomparable beauty of his life in Christ through his participation in the Sacred Liturgy. For this reason also, the essential beauty of the Sacred Liturgy must be carefully served. Participation in the Sacred Liturgy makes our own the words of Saint Paul regarding the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation and our sacramental participation in it through redemptive suffering:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints.³⁸

It is not that Christ's suffering is lacking in any way. It is perfect. It has accomplished perfectly our salvation. What remains is for us to be incorporated into His suffering, in order to share in the victory of eternal life. In the beauty of the Sacred Liturgy the Christian sees the beauty of his own nature. Drawn to the worship of God "in spirit and truth,"³⁹ the Christian understands the beauty of human nature

gebe, die zugleich die seine und die unsrige ist – die unsrige dadurch, dass wir mit ihm »ein Leib und ein Geist« geworden sind. Die Einzigartigkeit der eucharistischen Liturgie besteht eben darin, dass Gott selbst handelt und dass wir in dieses Handeln Gottes hineingezogen werden. Alles andere ist demgegenüber sekundär." Joseph Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie*, in *Theologie der Liturgie: Die sakramentale Begründung christlicher Existenz* (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 11), Freiburg: Herder, 2008, pp. 148-149. English translation: Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, in *Theology of the Liturgy* (Opera Omnia, vol. 11), tr. John Saward, Kenneth Baker, S.J., Henry Taylor, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), pp. 107-108.

³⁸ Col 1, 24-26.

³⁹ Jn 4, 24.

made free to love God and neighbor by the immeasurable and unceasing grace which flows from the glorious pierced Heart of Christ, the "fairest of the sons of men"⁴⁰ and He who "had no form or comeliness that we should look at him."⁴¹

Conclusion

It is my hope that this modest study of the Catholic teaching on conscience within the context of the inseparable relationship of reason and faith in knowing the truth and incarnating it in goodness of action, in the beauty of a holy life, has, first of all, made clear the most important and irreplaceable role of the Sacred Liturgy in the right formation of conscience, in accord with the pursuit of holiness of life. The living of our faith finds its highest expression in the manner of our worship of God, in the various elements of the Sacred Liturgy.

Even as the first disciples were attentive to the worthy celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, as is, for instance, witnessed in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, and even as the first missionaries were attentive, from the very beginning of their mission, to provide for the worthy and most beautiful possible celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, often at great sacrifice, so, too, must we be committed to the worthiness of our worship of God, so that it may be true worship of God and may, therefore, procure our sanctification and the sanctification of our world. Beauty is at the heart of worship of God and, therefore, leads us to ever greater holiness of life.

According to the ancient wisdom of the Church, the Sacred Liturgy is a "privileged witness of the apostolic tradition."⁴² The Church's wisdom is expressed in an adage of Prosper of Aquitaine: "The law of praying establishes the law of believing."⁴³ We can add that the law of praying

⁴⁰ Ps 45 [44], 2.

⁴¹ Is 53, 2.

⁴² "... un témoin privilégié de la tradition apostolique." A. G. Martimort, *L'Église en prière: Introduction à la Liturgie*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Desclée, 1965) p. 231. English translation by author.

⁴³ "Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi." Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 231. English translation by author.

also establishes the law of acting. Since the Sacred Liturgy is the highest and most perfect expression of our life in Christ, we rightly turn to the sacred rites, in order to understand more deeply the holiness of the Christian life in its every aspect. The Sacred Liturgy remains the essential source of our understanding of the faith and of its practice in a good and holy life.