

# TOWARDS AN ADULT CONSCIENCE

By KEVIN KELLY

‘**W**ILL YOU WRITE an article on the education of conscience?’ This request reminded me of a similar one a few years ago when I was asked to produce something on adult christian education. I responded to that request by reflecting on my five years of intense involvement in adult christian education through the Upholland Northern Institute. As I did so, I came to realize that what I had been doing was a kind of remedial education. I had been helping Catholics (myself included) to become liberated from inadequate and distorted views of catholic faith and morality.

I feel sure that for many of us education of conscience demands a similar process. Our consciences need to be liberated from various kinds of distortions inflicted on us by our catholic upbringing. So one title for this article could be ‘The liberation of conscience’.

My more recent experience in the team parish setting of Skelmersdale New Town (near Liverpool) has made me realize that that would be an over-simplification. While liberation of conscience is a crying need for many of us, especially of an older generation, for many other people, especially those in the younger age-group, the problem is quite different. Their main need is to be helped to true conscience. I was always rather puzzled by the French having only one word ‘conscience’ to cover our two english concepts, ‘conscience’ and ‘consciousness’. Now I can see more point to their running the two together. I am becoming more and more convinced that ‘consciousness’ catches the fullest flavour of what we really mean by conscience. From that angle, an alternative title to ‘Education of conscience’ would be ‘Consciousness raising’ or ‘The development of awareness or sensitivity’.

Many of us Catholics, especially of an older generation, have been brought up with a wounded and immature conscience. Sadly it is very easy to pass on this impediment to our children as well. One major feature of this immaturity is the way we view sin. We see sin basically as disobedience, the infringement of God’s law. And God’s law is made known to us by the Church in a series of

positive requirements (e.g. attending Sunday Mass) and negative prohibitions (e.g. no artificial contraception, no masturbation etc.). The result is that our conscience is reduced to the function of a kind of spiritual cash register, marking up all our sins (according to number and gravity) and having no positive role in the task of discovering what we should or should not do.

The biggest weakness in this approach is its impoverishment of something that is very precious to christian spirituality, namely, the will of God. Genuine spirituality recognizes a close link between our deepest desires and the will of God. This is to be expected when we accept that 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us' (Rom 5,5). If we can really get in touch with our deepest selves, we are at the contact point between ourselves and the Spirit of God. This is what *Gaudium et spes* means when it speaks of conscience as 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a person where we are alone with God, whose voice echoes in our depths' (n 16).

The law approach to conscience is de-personalizing. It takes away our individual input into any decision we make; but, even worse, it leaves no room for the Holy Spirit to touch us as persons. The 'will of God' is objectified in laws, principles and the directives of church authorities. And even the laws and principles lose their soul by being removed from the sphere of on-going questioning, searching and probing. God's will becomes equated with a static law, whereas it should be the driving force and inspiration in our decision-making process. As St Thomas puts it so beautifully, 'The New Law in its essence is the gift of the Holy Spirit' (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 106,1).

In the legalist approach to God's will, we can feel safe as long as we are doing what authority tells us to do. A deeper understanding of God's will means that if we are listening to the Spirit in the depths of our being, we will constantly be disturbed out of our comfortable security.

I am not saying that legalism was what was actually taught to Catholics. Nevertheless, it is certainly what many Catholics believe was taught to them and it is what many still believe and live by today. What authority says, goes. Obedience is the important attitude. Our conscience is clear if we do what the Church says. And conversely, we feel guilty if, for whatever reason, we have not fulfilled the objective requirements of one of the Church's laws. For instance, it is disturbing how many Catholics still feel a

need for absolution if they have missed Mass on Sunday, even if they were quite ill at the time. This is nothing less than an extreme oppression of conscience. A person who operates on this level has a seriously immature conscience.

There can be no liberation from this oppression until a person comes to believe that our christian God is a loving God and that there is nothing he wants more deeply than our personal and communal good and happiness. Once a person sees God in that light he is able to see that sin has no other meaning than what is person-injuring (in the narrow or broad sense). God is affected by sin only because human persons are precious to him and the last thing he wants is for persons to be harmed. To paraphrase St Thomas, we offend God only to the extent that we harm ourselves and others (cf *Contra Gentiles*, III, n 122).

It follows from all this that we only come to understand what is sinful by gradually discovering what ways of acting are against the true good of human persons. What is good and evil does not flow from some arbitrary 'will of God'. It flows from the very nature of the human person in community. Therefore, if we want to use the phrase 'law of God' or 'God's will', we must remember that we are not referring to divine edicts handed down from on high. Rather we are talking about a growing awareness among humankind as to what really serves the good of human persons and what contradicts that good. Developing this awareness is a momentous task shared by all men and women down through the ages. Each period of history has to face the fresh questions raised by changes in culture, new break-throughs in human understanding, and a whole variety of scientific and technological developments. The speed of this whole process seems to have accelerated enormously in our day. The nuclear issue, advances in bio-ethics, the advent of the micro-chip, etc., etc., are all posing new questions to men and women today. In what direction lies the true good of humankind?

In facing these questions, the Church has no hot-line to God. God's will does not arrive from heaven in diplomatic bags carried by some angelic courier. The Church has to join in the common search, confident that its belief in the human person as loved by God in Jesus, will give it something precious and unique to offer in this human quest for truth in personal and communal living.

Following the example of *Gaudium et spes*, the Church has to engage in a dialogue with the world; and that is a dialogue from

within. The Church does not look in on the modern world from the outside. The men and women who make up the Church today belong to the modern world. They share the same hopes and fears, sorrows and joys.

Dialogue involves listening and speaking. As Church we must listen to and be up-to-date with the best of scientific knowledge and the most recent technological developments. We must also listen to our own instincts through which we can plug into the common-sense of humankind. We must listen to other people of good will—and obviously 'good will' is not the exclusive preserve of Catholics or Christians. We must listen to our catholic and christian tradition. This is mediated to us mainly through the 'conserving' demands of authority complemented by the counter-thrust of theologians as they strive to understand our traditions in their historical context and to interpret their essence in the light of present-day faith and life.

Real sharing in dialogue also involves speaking. Some of that speaking can be checking out whether we have listened correctly. The opening paragraphs of *Gaudium et spes* are virtually the Church saying to the world, 'This is what I hear you saying: have I got you right?' Some speaking involves moving the dialogue on a stage further. And some speaking expresses our judgments or decisions. This kind of speaking is very crucial, especially in matters of urgency where decisions need to be made and acted upon.

Urgent and pressing decisions face our modern world. Therefore, our dialogue has to come to practical conclusions. Judgments have to be made. They must be the best we can do at the time but very often they can only be provisional, open to further refinement and perhaps even revision. To be practical they need to be definite but that does not mean they have to be definitive. A moral theologian whom I respect highly once said that he would love to read an encyclical letter which began 'I may be wrong but . . .' We need to have the courage of our convictions. An open mind does not mean a blank mind devoid of any convictions. But we do need to see ourselves involved in an on-going search for truth. That does not mean jettisoning the truth we have already attained but it might mean re-examining and re-thinking that truth so that we can appreciate its richness even more fully in the light of where we stand today in the on-going story of human culture and civilization. The whole of *Gaudium et spes* is written in this spirit but nowhere is it more clearly expressed than in n 44 of that

Constitution. After speaking about this whole process of dialogue, it then states: 'In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage'.

This dialogue process in the Church's involvement in the search for truth throws light on how the individual Christian moves towards a conscience-decision. I use the phrase 'conscience-decision' deliberately. Conscience is not some inner voice telling me what I should do, a kind of hot-line to God. Neither is it a negative alarm signal which goes off when I am about to do something wrong. Put very simply, conscience is myself deciding what I should do if I am to respond fully to God in this situation facing me. And responding fully to God implies responding fully to life and to my own deepest level of being.

If we view conscience in this way, it is clear why our understanding of what is meant by 'the will of God' is so important and why we need to be freed from voluntaristic and de-personalizing interpretations of God's will. In a sense we create God's will; or better, God's will takes shape through our decisions. We are not puppets with the whole of our lives and everything we do already pre-programmed by God, the puppet-master. As each major decision looms before us in life, God's will is not already determined and filed away in some kind of divine computer programme. Discovering God's will is not a matter of discovering what God has already decided that we should do. Rather, discovering God's will lies in ourselves deciding what is the most loving and responsible thing for us to do. We discover God's will by actually bringing it into being.

I have always been fond of Charles de Foucauld's prayer of abandonment. Not so long ago I was thrilled to discover just how similar that prayer is to the famous 'Take, Lord, and receive' act of self-offering in the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises. For many years, God forgive me, I had tended to interpret abandonment to God's will in a kind of fatalistic sense. God's will came to me mainly from the outside in the events of life and in the directives and instructions of my bishop and other legitimate authorities. I did not naturally link abandonment to God's will with what my deepest self really wanted to do.

Bit by bit I came to realize that it was meaningless to say to the Lord 'I offer you my mind and will' and then not use these precious faculties. That was not giving God my mind and will at

all; it was simply ceasing to use them. That path leads to fatalism or totalitarianism or to our becoming mere automatons. So it gradually dawned on me that abandonment to God's will was very closely linked with having the faith and courage to respond actively, not passively, to the situations in life. It meant being prepared to make decisions myself and accepting responsibility for my own decisions.

Naturally I am not suggesting that at every moment of the day we are always engaged in important conscience-decisions. Most of the time we are living out of decisions previously made and any intermediate decisions are not of such major import. Sadly, sometimes we are living without any sense of direction at all and so we experience much of what we are doing as pointless i.e. lacking point or direction.

All this points to the importance of a traditional catholic practice which is often misunderstood and in its mistaken form becomes oppressive rather than liberating. I refer to the examination of conscience. For many of us that has been presented to us as a looking back over the day to see in what ways we have sinned. A truer version of it, and one more in keeping with its ignatian inspiration, would see it as a time for deepening awareness in the busy and humdrum turmoil of daily life—almost an examination of consciousness. It is not a time when we make momentous new conscience decisions. It is more a time for sharpening our awareness of how the ordinary contacts and happenings of our day have this deeper layer to them. They are not pointless. They fit into (or contradict) the purpose of our life as we have determined it to be through our deeper conscience-decisions.

While not wanting to ignore the human phenomenon of guilt, I feel that conscience understood in this sense is light-years away from conscience as reduced to guilt-feelings. That is another impoverishment of conscience. It also fails to take God's commitment to this life seriously.

Guilt has certainly been one of our catholic obsessions, though I feel this is less so today. According to this guilt-centred approach, the important thing was to stand 'not-guilty' before God. That was why, at the level of theory, we tended to be very lenient towards an erroneous conscience. After all, if the error was invincible, there was no guilt present. If a person is not guilty, no sin has been committed, so there is no cause for concern.

There were two snags about this approach. One was that it did

not work. Somehow our law attitude to morality induced guilt in people whether they were personally responsible for what they did or not. The other was even more serious. It bred an attitude which I can only call 'irresponsibility towards life'. It failed to see how much this life matters in the eyes of God. It almost reduced our present life to being a kind of waiting-room for eternity, a supporting feature before the main film. The emphasis was on my personal immunity from guilt, my integrity. As long as my conscience was clear, I did not need to worry.

This life matters enormously to God. And above all, how human persons are treated is of paramount importance to God. Strangely enough, God seems well able to cope with guilt especially when it is good, healthy guilt arising from very real evil perpetrated and acknowledged. The acceptance of guilt is a major stepping-stone to forgiveness and real forgiveness is a deep experience of love. 'Her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love' (Lk 7,47).

It is not guilt that poses a problem to God but blindness. It was the blindness of his people that caused Jesus to weep over Jerusalem. It was the blindness of the Pharisees that infuriated Jesus and caused him to use such strong language in an attempt to break down their resistance.

The truth about the guilt-centred conscience is that it focuses on itself and it is blind to the real needs of other people and God's world. By being turned in on itself it becomes purely individualistic. *Gaudium et spes* challenged Christians to leave that kind of conscience behind them. 'Profound and rapid changes make it particularly urgent that no-one, ignoring the trend of events or drugged by laziness, content himself with a merely individualistic morality . . . Let everyone consider it his sacred obligation to count social necessities among the primary duties of modern men, and to pay heed to them' (n 30).

If God really loves people and wants them to love and respect each other, it matters enormously to God how we treat each other and how we manage the world and universe that we share as our communal home. God is not an impartial and uninvolved judge passing guilty or not-guilty verdicts on people. God is a committed and deeply involved lover to whom the dignity and happiness of each of us is of crucial importance.

A lover is a very vulnerable person since he or she suffers in and through the sufferings of the beloved. In freely creating

humankind out of love, God has made himself completely vulnerable. Sometimes we speak of God as the unmoved mover, the changeless one. Though these expressions have a core of truth in them, we can so easily misunderstand and misinterpret them. We can turn God into a being not really affected by what happens on earth, a royal God expecting absolute obedience but at root invulnerable to the sufferings of humankind. The stoic philosophers had a word for this state; they even looked on it as a state of perfection. They called it apathy (painlessness, non-suffering).

A greater distortion of the God of the bible and the God of Jesus could hardly be imagined. The bible is full of feeling words applied to God—love, jealousy, anger, longing, desire, wrath etc. To apply the word apathy to the God of the Old Testament could hardly be wider of the mark.

The same is true of Jesus—only more so. Jesus hanging on the cross gives the lie to any notion of God being invulnerable. The crucifixion could be called the vulnerability of God.

At the heart of christian revelation lies the mystery of God's sharing his pain with us. By that I do not mean God inflicting his pain on us. I simply mean God letting us know how much he loves us by actually letting us know how much he suffers because of us. In his mysterious decision to love us into existence God has made himself totally vulnerable. This is what the figure of Jesus on the cross is saying to us.

The cross is the symbol of the pain of God. But the voice of the pain of God in every age—and therefore in our own age also—is the voice of the poor, the oppressed, the weak, the sick, those who are pushed out on to the margins of society. That is what the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10, 29–37) is saying to us—we hear the call of God in the cry of the person in need. It is the same message we find in the tableau of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, 31–46.

The voice of the pain of God in our world today is still the voice of the poor, the oppressed, those who are discriminated against, those who are pushed to the edges of our society, those who are always at the back of the queue. The Vatican Council gives voice to the cry of some of these when it denounces all forms of discrimination 'whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion'. The voice of the pain of God can be heard at a global level—but the same voice is also to be heard in our neighbourhood, on our street, at work with us—or more



probably not at work with us. In fact, the more we become sensitive to it, the more it becomes a deafening chorus—in fact, so much so that as individuals we can be overwhelmed by it.

But we do not hear it alone—we must not hear it alone. As a family, whether in the Church or in society, we must listen to it together. And if we hear it in that context of our shared strength in the Church or in society, then far from overwhelming us, this cry of pain can become a challenge and an invitation.

Being a cry for a fully more human life, it is God's voice calling us into his future, inviting us to take up the challenge to continue creating a more human world. Becoming attuned to this voice is a vital factor in the formation of conscience. 'Consciousness-raising' is a very apt description of this process. If the listening process involved in this is really operative in us, then we are talking of an activity which can also be described as prayer.

There is always the temptation to close our ears to that cry of pain. To the extent that we are not sharers in that pain, to the extent that we want to keep our distance from it and not be disturbed by it, to that extent we want to stay where we are. And so 'where we are' comes to be described as order, standing over against disruption, disturbance, any change that can let that pain infiltrate into our tidy corner of the world.

But to opt for order in that sense is really to love what is dead—it is like a death-wish. It is to deny that human history is alive and that an essential part of its life is this cry for increasing emancipation. To be deaf to that cry is to be deaf to the voice of the living God. Through this cry God is calling us constantly into a more human future.

Of course, we need to be aware that what happens in reality is that often the cry of pain comes to us disguised as an outburst of anger, or resentment, or rebellion. Our natural reaction as individuals, and especially as a Church or as society, is to respond in the same language—anger for anger, rejection for rejection etc.—or else it is to try to muffle the cry by means of directing attention elsewhere or by tackling the superficial symptoms which are only the tip of the iceberg. We will never receive the gift of sharing another's pain unless we approach the other in love with a real desire to listen and a total absence of judgment and condemnation. A perfectionist, moralistic, over-demanding Church will find it difficult to share the pain of the weak and 'sinful' because such a Church will not give them that sense of security and trust which

is needed for them really to reveal their pain.

One often hears an appeal today for the Church to give firm moral teaching on something or other. 'Why doesn't the Church take a clear stand on the issue?' people say. To my mind, there are far more people looking to the Church not so much for clear moral principles as for compassion and understanding and the assurance that they are not alone in their pain and in their suffering—and that there are grounds for real hope for them.

Jesus went to the heart of the matter, he went down to the roots. That is because he was so concerned.

If we are to share his concern, his outraged anger, we must not rest satisfied with living on the surface. We too must try to go to the roots of the evils causing pain in our society today.

Developing some points made by John Bennett, an American theologian, in his introduction to the Sodepax Report, *In search of a theology of development* (1969), I would like to offer five suggestions about how we as Christians must go down to the roots if we are to be involved in the process of consciousness-raising.

1. God is involved in humanity in history. He is identified with the whole human race in Christ. Therefore, if we are truly to be the subjects of history, co-creators of history with God, we must get down to the root causes of what is happening in society.

2. Human being are essentially both spiritual and material. They are not souls which can without loss be separated from bodies and from communities. One consequence of this is that as persons we are very vulnerable to social, environmental cultural causes etc., which can have a crucial impact on our development as human persons. For instance, lack of nutrition in a child in the first six months can cause irreversible brain damage. If the glory of God is the human person fully alive, such negative influences have to be tackled at their roots.

3. Although God's love is for all men and women, nevertheless he has what could be called a 'strategic' preference for the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged. If we are to act as instruments for his 'strategic' preference, we need to go right to the roots of their problems.

4. There are social consequences of sin, whether of the sins of individuals or of the sins embodied in social groups. To put it very simply and perhaps rather provocatively—our original sin today (i.e. what is wrong at the roots in our society) will condition the sufferings and temptations of the next generation.

5. As Christians we belong to the world-wide body of Christ—and so we must become conscious of the sufferings of the rest of the body. There is almost a reversal of missionary role here. Instead of our sending out missionaries to preach the word of salvation to the pagans, we need to send out humble listeners who will help us hear the pain of the oppressed and who will perhaps help us to see how much we belong to the root cause of the evil they are suffering.

The first of the five reasons I have given above really touches on the root of christian confidence—namely, the truth that God really cares about us.

With our finite minds, we cannot grasp the full meaning of what this care of God really means. But in the person of Jesus it comes to us translated into the human language of love. The love of Jesus embodies the truth that God really cares about us.

God's care extends to all—to every man, woman and child; and the proof of that lies precisely in his avowed love for those who in human terms are regarded as unlovable—the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts. God's so-called 'preferential love' for them is in fact the verification of his love for everyone.

And the genuineness of God's love is seen in the pain of God over the pain of those whom he loves—the sym-path-y of God (suffering with—diametrically opposed to 'apathy') incarnate in the person of Jesus and most clearly seen on the cross.

Paradoxically it is this pain of God, this outraged anger, which is the source of our confidence as Christians. If God shares our pain, what need do we have to worry about the final outcome? This comes through very strongly in Paul's tremendous shout of trust and confidence at the end of Chapter 8 of Romans.

As Christians, we are empowered by sharing the outraged anger of God's love. More than that, if we believe, as we must, that God's spirit is active in the depths of every man and woman, then in truth everyone is offered the gift of being empowered by the outraged anger of God's love. Surely we can say that this lies at the root of all human restlessness about what is wrong and out of gear and inhuman in our world. Pope Paul is virtually saying that when he writes: 'Beneath an outward appearance of indifference, in the heart of every man there is a will to live in brotherhood and a thirst for justice and peace which is to be expanded' (*Octogesima adveniens* [1971]).

In this article I have been suggesting that liberation of conscience

is still a crying need for many Catholics and I have tried to examine some of the distortions from which our catholic consciences need to be liberated. I have also looked at the way we need to grow in personal and social awareness if our conscience-decisions are to be true both to ourselves and to the world entrusted to us by the Lord. As an article on the education of conscience, it has not been a very ordered and scientific treatment. It is offered simply as a contribution to the on-going dialogue.