

# THE FIRST WEEK AND THE FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

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THE PHILOSOPHERS tell us that conscience is not a mysterious little inner voice: it is our human intellect applied to our human behaviour, the mind of man making moral judgments, the dictate of right reason. But these definitions do not begin to describe conscience as we experience it, its power to shake and disturb, to comfort and reassure, its mysterious, imperious quality.

The Old Testament did not have a word for conscience. Instead the writers use 'the heart', 'the reins' and so on. Conscience denotes that core of human sensitivity where body and spirit are at one; and 'gut' reaction, not merely an intellectual judgment. Reaction to what? Reaction to something which is both within us and beyond us. God is not our conscience, but he speaks to us in the depths of ourselves. 'The word of God can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit—it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts'.<sup>1</sup> In Romans, St Paul seems to use faith and conscience as synonymous. 'Hold on to your own belief, as between yourself and God—and consider the man fortunate who can make his decision without going against conscience'.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever an adequate description of conscience may be, formation of conscience must, from the very meaning of the word, include growth in self-knowledge, which is not the same as intellectual knowledge about ourselves, but includes a developing knowledge of our own emotions and feelings. The greater the unity and integrity of our being, the more sensitive conscience will be. The saints were alarmingly conscious of their sinfulness. Therefore, formation of conscience includes growth in self-knowledge and a growing harmony and integrity within ourselves. In christian teaching, growth in self-knowledge and integrity is not possible through individual effort. Man is a related being. 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you'.<sup>3</sup> 'You have created me for yourself, and my heart is restless until it rests in you'.<sup>4</sup> It is only in so

<sup>1</sup> Heb 4, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 14, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Jer 1, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, 1.

far as a man looks beyond himself, opens himself to the transcendent God, that he can know himself and find unity within himself.

St Ignatius, in the introductory observations to the Exercises, writes: 'We call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God'.<sup>5</sup> The Exercises were written in the sixteenth century. Can they help twentieth-century man, living in a very different world, to rid himself of those attachments which prevent him from finding God's will? An insensitive, unformed or deformed conscience blinds and deafens us to God's will. If the Exercises are to help in the formation of conscience, they must lead us to self-knowledge, open us up to the transcendent God and so develop in us a harmony and integrity of our whole being. Can they do this for modern man? Before I attempt an answer, I should like to meander through my own experience.

Certainly, we need help more than ever today in the formation of our conscience. I work as chaplain to catholics at Glasgow University. Frequently, students say, 'I haven't been to confession for years. I feel the need to go but think this may only be the effect of years of indoctrination in a catholic school. Besides, I don't know what to confess. I'm not sure what sin means any more. I no longer believe the moral teaching I was given and don't know what criteria to apply to my own behaviour'. Others complain of feeling trapped. 'The Church tells us that we are free to follow our conscience. She also tells us that our conscience is false if it does not agree with catholic teaching. Rome and the Kremlin offer the same kind of freedom: the freedom of conformity'. I was in a group of students recently and we were asked to give an adjective to describe ourselves. Five out of eight gave 'confused'. The confusion is not limited to students. I have met many parents who have admitted to greater confusion than their children. Their children can cope more easily with change and uncertainty than they, who were brought up in a much more rigid Church in which questioning was discouraged. The confusion is not, of course, limited to the catholic population. Universities are full of very knowledgeable people, but the academic specialist can be a helpless fool in his personal life and relations. In our educational system we have divinized the intellect and brutalized the emotions. This has enabled us to make rapid progress in technology and acquire vast wealth. We possess the means to the

<sup>5</sup> Exx 1. All references to *The Spiritual Exercises* are taken from the edition of Louis J. Puhl s.j. (Chicago, 1951).

good life, but we cannot live well. The century of technological progress has also been the century of ingenious torture, subtle manipulation of human beings to serve the needs of the economy, and of mass extermination. In Britain, the issue in the last two national elections has been economics, not human health. 'By yon bonnie banks and yon bonnie braes of Loch Lomond' lies the highest concentration of nuclear weapons in Europe. The emotions have been so successfully deadened that we no longer realize that we are acting inhumanly, we no longer know who we are. I hear so many say, 'I feel I'm being processed. I no longer know who I am'.

I suggest that there are three factors which contribute to the confusion I have described — a predominance of fear, a distrust of self, a tendency to over-conceptualize. These three factors inhibit the formation of a christian conscience. In ignatian language they can be called 'inordinate attachments'.

### *Fear*

An anglican woman was interested in learning more about the roman catholic Church. In general she was attracted, but some aspects repelled her. One dislike was the catholic habit of calling some feast days 'holidays of obligation'. Her first experience of a holiday of obligation after becoming a roman catholic confirmed her distaste. In the bench beside her, a mother of two restless children leaned over and told them, 'If you don't attend this Mass you'll go to hell'. Imagine that, as a small child, your parents take you along to meet good old uncle George. They tell you that he is very rich, very wise, very powerful, very loving, and he can give you everything you could wish for in life. You meet uncle George in his forbidding mansion. He tells you that he wants to see you every Sunday for forty minutes for the rest of your life. 'If you don't come', he says, 'come on and I'll show you what will happen'. He leads you down a dark and stinking passage to a vast furnace room, opens the door of one. You hear the screams, see the horror, smell the burning flesh of children. On the way home your parents ask, 'Do you love uncle George more than anyone or anything else in the world?' 'Oh yes', you answer, 'with all my heart and soul and strength'. You loathe him as a hideous monster, but you dare not admit it, even to yourself. The all-merciful and loving God has put us in this vale of tears, which he has peppered with landmines, and if we put a foot wrong by committing one of the many acts labelled 'mortal sin', then we spend an eternity in hell. Mortal sin includes missing Mass on Sundays and any deliberate pleasure in sex outside marriage. This fear is crippling. It stifles knowledge of

God's revelation and makes a mockery of the gospel. It makes people afraid to think for themselves, in case thought leads them astray. This, together with a natural mental inertia, ensures a lasting disinterest in religion. Fear of sexuality makes us afraid of ourselves, of our own feelings and emotions which are the motive forces of our life, cuts us off from others and so renders the greatest of commandments an impossibility for us. The predominance of fear cripples conscience.

### *Self-distrust*

As catholics we are encouraged in self-distrust. By original sin we are wounded in mind and will, and our emotions have run riot (concupiscence). Since we can trust neither our mind, nor will, nor emotions, the only wise thing to do (but how can we trust our judgement on this?) is to put our trust in something or someone outside ourselves, for example in the Church, or in some other system or person who can promise us security convincingly enough. Is this why there is such bewilderment and confusion among so many catholics at change in the Church? Does this self-distrust explain the readiness of some catholics to become communists and some communists to become catholics, exchanging one authoritative system for another? Where there is no self-trust, there can be no growth in self-knowledge, and therefore no development of conscience. Self-distrust cripples human development.

### *Over-conceptualization*

We have divinized the intellect and consigned the emotions to the animal in us. I heard a story of a baby in hospital who was not responding to treatment. The consultant summoned the nurse, told her to care for the baby as though it were her own, but added, 'Don't tell anyone I said this'. The child recovered, but because the method was 'unscientific', the consultant was ashamed of it. Emotions cannot be measured, quantified, and so they are discounted. Yet emotions, from the very meaning of the word, are the motive forces of life. Stifle them and you stifle life. 'But they are dangerous'. Of course, they are dangerous, especially when stifled. 'But they must be controlled by reason'. Yes, of course they must, but by the reason that is in them; and so to control them we must know them. I read of an experiment conducted with small children. They were provided with all kinds of food and no restraint was put on them. After a short period they were selecting a balanced diet for themselves. They had not studied dietetics,

but their feelings, no doubt unpleasant, had taught them to eat reasonably. There is not time to elaborate this point. If the feelings and emotions are not respected, if they are ignored and treated as the slaves of reason, then they take their revenge in insensitivity, sentimentality or debauchery.

Over-conceptualization affects us all, irrespective of our religious belief or lack of it. Fear and self-distrust can afflict catholics more than others. When all three are combined, it is not surprising that we find a catholic population which tends to be passive, responding only to given stimuli (for example, the catholic schools and abortion issues), showing no great initiatives, a lack of enthusiasm except when we start tearing each other to pieces in the interest of 'orthodoxy', a ready acceptance of a clerically dominated Church, which assures us of our eternal security provided we do what we are told. Hence the frequent appeals from hierarchy and clergy for greater loyalty and obedience and the shrill condemnations of all who seem to rock the boat. As we distrust our emotions, we can become capable of acting inhumanly in the name of God. I'm sure that many of us could write a book of horror stories illustrating Lucretius's thundering lines: *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* — such evil deeds could religion prompt.

How far does the first week of the Exercises hinder the formation of conscience?

James Joyce's account, in *Portrait of the Artist*, of a jesuit retreat is a classic accusation of the Exercises as instruments of fear. St Ignatius must not be blamed for the ferocious and sadistic exuberance of some of his sons; but the Exercises themselves do seem to instil fear, encourage self-distrust and to be over-conceptual. Here are some examples taken from the text:

#### *Fear*

The petition of the first exercise. 'Here it will be to ask for shame and confusion because I see how many have been lost on account of a single mortal sin.'<sup>6</sup>

I will consider that they (the fallen angels) went to hell for one sin.<sup>7</sup>

By their sin they (Adam and Eve) lost original justice. On account of this sin — great corruption came upon the human race that caused many to be lost in hell.<sup>8</sup> (Consider) one who went to hell because of one mortal sin. . . . Use the understanding to consider that because of sin, and of acting against the Infinite Goodness, one is justly condemned for ever'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Exx 48.

<sup>7</sup> Exx 50.

<sup>8</sup> Exx 51.

<sup>9</sup> Exx 52.

The hell meditation. 'See in imagination the vast fires, and the souls enclosed, as it were, in bodies of fire. Hear the wailing, the howling. Smell the filth and corruption. Taste the bitterness of tears, sadness and remorse of conscience. Consider those who were lost before the coming of Christ: those who were lost during his lifetime; those who were lost after his life here on earth. Thereupon I will give thanks to God our Lord'.<sup>10</sup>

### *Distrust of Self*

I will consider myself as a source of corruption and contagion from which has issued countless sins and evils and most offensive poison.<sup>11</sup>

How is it that the earth did not open to swallow me up, and create new hells in which I should be tormented for ever?<sup>12</sup>

### *Over-conceptualization*

The First Principle and Foundation, which prefaces the Exercises, is a masterly piece of abstraction. 'Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul'. Everything else, which must include persons, is a means to help me to this end; therefore I must use them in so far as they are helpful, rid myself of them in so far as they hinder me. What potential dangers there are in this First Principle! The danger of seeing everything and everyone as a means to an end, encouraging blindness and insensitivity. The end is presented as 'the salvation of his soul'. Individualism is the death of religion and a desire to improve our own lives can be just as self-interested as any other form of egocentricity.

The Exercises seem more calculated to distort conscience than to form it, to stifle it rather than give it growth. They can produce conformists, not men of initiative and originality. They can produce soldiers — theirs not to reason why — papal shock-troops, whose hallmark is loyalty and obedience to orders from superiors, unloving and unloved men. Jesuits are often accused of having such characteristics. But the early jesuits and many, thank God, today, cannot be accused of being frightened conformists, fearful, distrustful of themselves and atrophied in their emotions and feelings. The early jesuits were exciting men of vision and initiative and they attributed their spirit to the Spiritual Exercises. What has happened? Were they altogether different breeds of men, or were the Exercises given differently in the early Society? The Exercises were certainly given differently in the early Society and we are only now returning to the original method by giving 'Directed' rather than 'Preached' retreats. An adequate answer to the objections I have given to the First Week of the Exercises would require a further

<sup>10</sup> Exx 65 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Exx 58.

<sup>12</sup> Exx 60.

article, which I hope to write later. Here I can mention only a few points.

How far do the Exercises help in the formation of christian conscience?

We can, in christian teaching, only come to self-knowledge and find unity within ourselves, which are both essential if conscience is to be sensitive, in so far as we turn towards God. The preparatory prayer of every exercise in the First Week is: 'I will beg God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Majesty'. Their object is to help us seek and find the will of God, to find all things in him and God in all things, dwelling in them, labouring in them, source of all that is good, merciful and just. The Exercises certainly encourage us to turn away from ourselves towards God. But what kind of God do they present? Do they use the concept of God to force us into a ready-made pattern of behaviour, to make us conformists?

The Exercises certainly do not encourage a conformist mentality. The whole object is to help the exercitant to discern what is God's will for him/her. They are exercises in sensitivity of the whole person before God and they pay particular attention to the emotions and feelings of the individual exercitant, so much so that Ignatius never gave the Exercises to groups, but always gave them individually. The Exercises fail and can be very dangerous when we attempt mass production, preaching them to large numbers. A few quotations from Ignatius's preliminary observations, later called annotations, illustrate his delicacy and sensitivity:

The one who explains to another the method and order of meditating and contemplating should narrate accurately the facts of the contemplation or meditation. Let him adhere to the points, and add only a short or summary explanation. The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of facts, and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer or better understood. . . . Now this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if the one giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.<sup>13</sup>

If that annotation were understood and observed, most of the objections I made earlier would not stand. Incidentally, what a revolution

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<sup>13</sup> Exx 2.

there could have been in education if jesuits had always followed the spirit of this observation in their schools.

The fourth, ninth and eighteenth annotations warn the director to allow the exercitant to go at his own pace, caution him against giving anything too advanced or too subtle:

Each one should be given those exercises that would be more helpful and profitable according to his willingness to dispose himself for them.<sup>14</sup> The director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord.<sup>15</sup> (The director) should not seek to know the private thoughts and sins of the exercitant.<sup>16</sup>

If the director observes that the exercitant is in desolation and tempted, let him not deal severely and harshly with him, but kindly and gently.<sup>17</sup>

It is a pity that St Ignatius did not give the retreat to James Joyce! But how does the exercitant learn this sensitivity to God's action upon him? Through the rules for discernment, which help him to understand what God is saying to him through his feelings and emotions, through his experience of consolation and desolation.

I will call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God. . . . Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord.<sup>18</sup>

I call desolation what is entirely the opposite (to consolation), as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness arising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith; want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord.<sup>19</sup>

St Ignatius suggests that one reason for desolation may be that 'God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves'. These quotations should be sufficient to show the importance St Ignatius gives to the feelings and the emotions, and the respect he shows for the individuality of each person. He was suspect in his day of encouraging illuminism.

<sup>14</sup> Exx 18.

<sup>15</sup> Exx 15.

<sup>16</sup> Exx 17.

<sup>17</sup> Exx 7.

<sup>18</sup> Exx 316.

<sup>19</sup> Exx 317.



What about the over-conceptualization in the First Principle and Foundation? This is not a part of the Exercises, but a preface added after the Exercises were written. It is a masterly, but arid, summary of the Exercises and may be compared to reading a map before climbing a mountain. Conceptualization, in the form of maps, is very useful, as every hill climber knows; but if you do not know what the map signs are really saying, the map can be dangerously misleading. So too, the First Principle and Foundation.

But do not the Exercises instil fear and self-distrust? It is clear from the annotations that the director must not instil fear and self-distrust. He is to let the exercitant be and let the fear arise from within him, a healthy fear that arises out of a growing awareness of God's goodness. St Ignatius was a man of his time, and thought in the images and within the parameters of sixteenth-century culture. We do not have the same images or the same world-view, and we do not need to try and force ourselves back into the sixteenth century. The grace of God will lead us to know him in our own images and concepts. We still need to pray for a growing and intense sorrow and tears for our sins, to pray to know ourselves even as we are known.

Because of fear, self-distrust and over-conceptualization, many who make the Exercises today may be very slow to experience genuine consolation and desolation. They must never be hurried or harassed. Self-knowledge and self-trust can only grow slowly in an atmosphere of acceptance and gentleness.

In conclusion. The Exercises can be a most effective instrument for the formation of a christian conscience, provided they are given as St Ignatius advises in the annotations. If the annotations are ignored, the Exercises can become a most effective instrument for deforming conscience and destroying faith.