

Forming Conscience in a Contemporary World: Aquinas's Teaching on the Gifts of Wisdom and Counsel

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Abstract: Thomas Aquinas's teaching on virtue, which includes reference to conscience, offers a rich and solid moral teaching for the twenty-first century. Integral to this teaching on Christian virtue are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The gifts of counsel (paired with prudence) and wisdom (paired with charity) are particularly relevant for formation of conscience. These gifts provide a docility to the *instinctum divinum* necessary for proper formation of one's own conscience, particularly in the context of contemporary dialogue with the Church and the world.

Keywords: conscience, synderesis, virtue, gifts of the Holy Spirit, counsel, wisdom, prudence, *instinctum divinum*

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Introduction

Over a century ago G.K. Chesterton wrote that “When a religious scheme is shattered [... (He was referring to the effects of the Reformation)], it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and [...] do more terrible damage.” The modern world, he concluded, “is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad [...] because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone.”¹

Today these words seem prophetic. Though the term *virtue* is not as common today, its vestiges appear in cries for justice, freedom, sincerity, and tolerance that wander madly throughout the media, in society, and in the Church. As examples one need only consider cries of justice for women while transgender males compete in female sports, and cries of justice for women coupled with cries of injustice against laws protecting unborn children.

Dialogue on truth and freedom necessarily include reference to conscience, where similar madness reigns. A contemporary of Chesterton, the German positivist, Friedrich Jodl, wrote that ‘in the entire field of ethics there is probably no other concept that has been so subject to abuse, employed in such different and inconsistent ways, and been shrouded in such mysterious darkness – whether intentionally or otherwise – as the concept of conscience.’² Matthew Levering’s recent historical study *Abuse of Conscience*, confirms Jodl’s statement.³

In response to this madness we have witnessed a resurgence of theologians having recourse to Thomas Aquinas’s rich and deep teaching on virtue; others have spoken anew to his principles on conscience. These are necessary, but I would argue that we must also revisit his teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and not merely as speculative knowledge of the virtue and gifts as moral distinctions and categories. These alone are insufficient for dialogue with our contemporaries and can lead to the error Pope Francis addressed in *Evangelii Gaudium*: we speak the truth but our interlocutors “take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴ I may speak of moral virtue and conscience, but my listeners may only hear dogmatism,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 53.

² Quoted by H. Stroker. *Conscience: Phenomena and Theories* (orig. *Das Gewissen: Erscheinungsformen und Theorien*, 1925), trans. Philip E. Blosser (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 16.

³ See Matthew Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Catholic Moral Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

⁴ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 39.

virtue signaling, legalism, and guilt.⁵ The Church is called to present truth in charity, but today, more than ever, it requires creative fidelity, a creativity rooted in the simple but profound teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “In the formation of conscience [...] we are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.”⁶

My thesis is that truth as dialogue infers a moral component even in the speculative realm. Dialogue requires formation of conscience and docility to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. To support this argument I will first review a few essential principles of Thomas’s teaching on conscience and its formation. I will then address the necessity of two of the cognitive gifts directly connected to this formation – counsel, which corresponds to prudence,⁷ and wisdom, which corresponds to charity.

Defining Conscience

The term *conscience* denotes a multi-faceted reality. While this is understandable considering the complexity of conscience, it has also led to serious distortions, as occurred in modern and post-modern theories that identified an isolated aspect of conscience as the full reality, thereby reducing conscience to a thin caricature of its true self. Consider Cartesian minimalist theories, which defined conscience as mere consciousness or a vague moral awareness. One found an odd

⁵ Jean Daniélou once noted that when one says truth “the hackles rise” and we are accused of “dogmatism and intolerance.” Jean Daniélou, SJ. *The Scandal of Truth*, London: Lowe and Brydon, 19612.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, 2nd ed. (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 85.

⁷ Though I only briefly mention *prudence* below, this paper presumes the fullness of Thomas’s teaching on this virtue and the structure of the moral act. Stated briefly, though of the practical intellect, prudence also pertains to the will since her proper act is to command: *recta ratio agibilium*. The acts of counsel and judgement precede command and are perfected by three virtues allied to prudence. *Eubolia* perfects counsel while *synesis* and *gnome* perfect judgement, respectively as to simple and complex judgments. Contrary to manualist and contemporary moral theories, which consider prudence to be at the service of conscience, Thomas proposes a reciprocity between the various acts of the practical intellect. True virtue lies not merely in judging well but in bringing the judgment to bear on action by way of command perfected by the habit of prudence. The *iudicium conscientia* of a young man living with his girlfriend (example used later in the paper), may rebuke him and incite him to marry the young woman, but without prudence he will fail to accomplish the act. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae (STh)* (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012), Ia-IIae, qq. 14-18; SThIIa-IIae, qq. 47-51. As to Thomas giving priority to prudence, I would note that Roberto Busa’s concordance lists 767 instances of the term *conscientia*, the majority occurring in Thomas’s *Scriptum super Sententiis*, *Summa Theologiae*, and *DV*. Perspective comes when comparing this number to the 1174 occurrences of *prudencia*, a number that does not include the contrary vices and related virtues. Numbers alone are an insufficient argument, but they do give some indication of the import of the virtue. Roberto Busa, SJ, *Index Thomisticus*, English online edition, eds. Eduardo Bernot and Enrique Alarcón. <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/it/index.age> [accessed 15.5.2023].

congruence in conclusions rooted in Freudian notions of superego and erroneous ideas of “Catholic guilt.” Though distinct, each identified a dangerous tension in the “maturing” soul that struggles to free itself from a form of slavery to a foreign authority. Rationalist theories presented conscience as pure knowledge in contrast to voluntarist or Humeian theories, which detached conscience from reason in favor of the will or emotions,⁸ and psychological theories, which limited conscience to *self-evaluative feelings*.

Even in the Middle Ages the term was used equivocally. Thomas notes four uses of ‘conscience,’ all signifying application of knowledge to *some* thing – *conscientia*.⁹ The first notion, which I leave aside for this discussion, is conscience as an object, that of which I am conscious. The second use of conscience identifies a power that underlies consciousness. We use this when speaking of formation of conscience, since one does not properly speak of ‘forming’ a habit or an act.¹⁰ Thomas identifies a third notion of conscience as act as the proper sense of the term, the discernment or judgement of the power.¹¹ Finally, since a judgement of conscience presupposes a habit, a principle of the act of judgement, conscience is sometimes identified with this habit, though it is more properly identified as the natural quasi-habit of *synderesis*.

⁸ See David Hume, “Moral Distinctions Not Derived from Reason” from *Treatise on Human Nature*, Bk. III in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 11-17.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate (DV)*, a cura di Raymundi Spiazzi, O.P. (Romae: Marietti, 1948), q. 17, a. 1, resp. “Nomen enim conscientiae significat applicationem scientiae ad aliquid.” Cf. *STh* Ia, q. 79, a. 13. “Conscientia enim, secundum proprietatem vocabuli, importat ordinem scientiae ad aliquid, nam conscientia dicitur cum alio scientia. Applicatio autem scientiae ad aliquid fit per aliquem actum.”

¹⁰ By negating the application of “forming” to habit, I am speaking of a habit one already possesses and not simple acquiring of a habit. Once one has something of a habit, the habit can be developed and perfected, but there is no new “form” such as that found in the practical intellect when the ‘conscience’ can change from ‘deformed’ to being properly ‘formed.’

¹¹ *DV* q. 17, a. 1, resp. “Dicendum, quod quidam dicunt conscientiam tripliciter dici. Quandoque enim conscientia sumitur pro ipsa re conscita, sicut etiam fides accipitur pro re credita; quandoque pro potentia qua conscimus; quandoque etiam pro habitu.” Thomas compares this equivocal use to the term ‘understanding,’ which can apply to 1) what I understand; 2) the power of understanding; 3) the habit; 4) the act. Further confusion arises among Thomas’s interpreters of conscience and prudence. Most noteworthy would be those who erroneously identify conscience with the virtue of prudence. One example is Josef Pieper who argued that “The living unity, incidentally, of *synderesis* and prudence is nothing less than the thing we commonly call ‘conscience.’ Prudence, or rather perfected practical reason which has developed into prudence, is distinct from *synderesis* in that it applies to specific situations. We may, if we will, call it the ‘situation conscience.’ Just as the understanding of principles is necessary to specific knowledge, so natural conscience is the prerequisite and the soil for the concrete decisions of the ‘situation conscience, and in these decisions natural conscience first comes to a definite realization. It is well, therefore, to remember, as we consider the foregoing and the following comments, that the word ‘conscience’ is intimately related to and well-nigh interchangeable with the word ‘prudence.’” Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 11.

Conscience is an act - a judgement

Regarding the proper notion of conscience as a practical judgement, Thomas argues that this *iudicium conscientia* applies knowledge to a concrete act, by which it determines whether an act already completed or yet to be performed is good or evil. Based on this determination the *iudicium conscientia* bears witness to, incites or binds, accuses, excuses, torments, or rebukes.¹² Consider an example of a meeting between a religious Sister and a young Italian man (Massimo) at a shrine. Massimo reveals to Sister that a priest had just refused him absolution because he was living with his girlfriend. He adds that prior to that moment he was unaware that cohabitation was sinful. Both the priest and the newly enlightened Massimo made judgements of conscience, applying the general law: “the marital act is restricted to marriage,” to Massimo’s particular act. During the confession the priest’s conscience bore witness to and incited him to inform Massimo of the sinful nature of his action. Having received this information, Massimo’s conscience witnessed to, bound, accused, and also tormented him to some degree, which led to his appeal to Sister.

Knowledge of Conscience

Since conscience applies knowledge, we need to examine the source(s) of this knowledge. Due to its authority coupled with the obligation to follow one’s conscience, many consider conscience to be purely subjective, something of a “supreme tribunal” handing down infallible decisions, isolated from any higher objective truths. Pope John Paul II definitively rejected this error in *Veritatis Splendor*.¹³ He also condemned related notions of license, a voluntarist “right of self-will,”¹⁴ creative conscience, and erroneous conclusions like that proposed by James Keenan who wrote, “We are obliged not to follow the church [...] because we are absolutely not free to violate our consciences.”¹⁵

Such statements underscore the fact that at the heart of questions of sources of knowledge are questions of authority. On this point traditional ecclesial and Thomistic teaching on conscience acknowledge both an objective dimension of conscience in reference to natural law and the authority of the Church, and the

¹² *STh* Ia, q. 79, a. 13. “Dicitur enim conscientia testificari, ligare vel instigare, et etiam accusare vel remordere sive reprehendere [...] sit bene factum vel non bene factum, et secundum hoc, conscientia dicitur excusare vel accusare, seu remordere.” See also *DV*, q. 17, a. 1, resp.

¹³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6 August 1993), 32.

¹⁴ John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 250.

¹⁵ James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 2004), 36.

subjective authority of the individual conscience. These dimensions meet without negating or destroying one another. Discussion of these two dimensions requires a shift to the second notion of conscience. But although conscience is sometimes identified as a habit, this habit is more properly referred to as *synderesis* which Jerome called a spark of conscience (*scintilla conscientiae*).¹⁶

The Objective Dimension of Conscience: *Synderesis* - Infallible and Binding

We find the scriptural origins of this spark in Paul's discussion of the law written in the hearts of the Gentiles.¹⁷ Newman spoke of it as the "aboriginal Vicar of Christ."¹⁸ Benedict XVI identified the same reality as *anamnesis*.¹⁹ We also find traces of *synderesis* in *Gaudium et Spes* 16 which elaborated on this law of conscience which summons man continually "to love good and avoid evil [...]; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths."²⁰

Many use these descriptions and definitions to promote subjective autonomy, but careful reading indicates an objective dimension of these subjective notions of authority. Conscience begins with a law written in man's heart. Subjective knowledge alone cannot logically be the cause of conscience's binding nature and authority. *Iudicium conscientiae* does not begin with man's isolated decision, but grounds this decision in a law imprinted by God on the soul of every rational being. Thomas will argue that this natural law, also revealed in the Ten Commandments, has been promulgated to all creation: therefore, all men are bound to observe it and none can claim ignorance.²¹ He defines *synderesis* as a "special natural habit" which provides

¹⁶ This paper acknowledges but does not address the question of the scholastic *synderesis* and its origins in Jerome's *syneidēsis* found in his *Commentary on Ezechiel*. For further reading see M.B. Crowe, "The Term *Synderesis* and the Scholastics," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 23 (1956): 151-194 and 228-245; Jacques de Blic, "Synderese Ou Conscience," *Revue d'ascetique et de mystique*, 25 (1949): 146-157; Timothy Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Rm. 2:14-16, "They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." [All scriptural references are from the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006)].

¹⁸ Newman, 248.

¹⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 32.

²⁰ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* (2 December 1965), 16; CCC 1776.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Collationes in decem praeceptis*, trans. J. Collins (NY: 1939), *proemium*: "Haec nihil aliud est nisi lumen intellectus insitum nobis a Deo, per quod cognoscimus quid agendum et quid vitandum. Hoc lumen et hanc legem dedit Deus homini in creatione. Sed multi credunt excusari per ignorantiam, si hanc legem non observant."

man with knowledge of the first principle of the practical reason: “good is to be done and evil avoided.”²² Very closely related are the first principles regarding those general goods towards which creatures are inclined: 1) preservation of being – common to all creation; 2) continuation of the species and care of offspring – common to all animals; 3) the natural desire to know the truth of God and to live in society – common to all rational beings.²³ Thomas speaks of these proper common principles in his well-known question 94 article 2 of the *Secunda secundae*, noting that the most general first moral principle – “seek the good” and its contrary, avoid evil – can never be blotted out or ignored.

Besides natural law and Revelation, Thomas employs an important epistemological argument to demonstrate the necessity of synderesis. The nature of the human rational soul, he writes, is such that both in the speculative and practical realms it must know some truth “without investigation,” principles which are “stable and certain.”²⁴ In the practical realm, conscience applies general moral principles to the particular. Therefore, knowledge of these principles necessarily precedes *iudicium conscientiae*, and since, as rational beings one is continually making such judgements, this first light must be habitual, ready for man’s use at any moment.²⁵ Thomas compares the knowledge of synderesis to a seed which contains “in germ” all knowledge that follows. It belongs to the very nature of the intellectual soul, such that, no man can be deprived of its light.

²² *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 79, a. 12. “Unde et principia operabilium nobis naturaliter indita, non pertinent ad specialem potentiam; sed ad specialem habitum naturalem, quem dicimus synderesim. Unde et synderesis dicitur instigare ad bonum, et murmurare de malo, in quantum per prima principia procedimus ad inveniendum, et iudicamus inventa. Patet ergo quod synderesis non est potentia, sed habitus naturalis.”

²³ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 2. “Inest enim primo inclinatio homini ad bonum secundum naturam in qua communicat cum omnibus substantiis, prout scilicet quaelibet substantia appetit conservationem sui esse secundum suam naturam. Et secundum hanc inclinationem, pertinent ad legem naturalem ea per quae vita hominis conservatur, et contrarium impeditur. Secundo inest homini inclinatio ad aliqua magis specialia, secundum naturam in qua communicat cum ceteris animalibus. Et secundum hoc, dicuntur ea esse de lege naturali quae natura omnia animalia docuit, ut est coniunctio maris et feminae, et educatio liberorum, et similia. Tertio modo inest homini inclinatio ad bonum secundum naturam rationis, quae est sibi propria, sicut homo habet naturalem inclinationem ad hoc quod veritatem cognoscat de Deo, et ad hoc quod in societate vivat.”

²⁴ *DV* q. 16, a. 1, *resp.* “Unde et in natura humana, in quantum attingit angelicam, oportet esse cognitionem veritatis sine inquisitione et in speculativis et in practicis; et hanc quidem cognitionem oportet esse principium totius cognitionis sequentis, sive practicae sive speculativae, cum principia oporteat esse certiora et stabiliora. Unde et hanc cognitionem oportet homini naturaliter inesse, cum haec quidem cognitio sit quasi seminarium quoddam totius cognitionis sequentis; et in omnibus naturis sequentium operationum et effectuum quaedam naturalia semina praeexistant. Oportet etiam hanc cognitionem habitualement esse, ut in promptu existat ea uti cum fuerit necesse.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Authority of Conscience

The nature of this seed or spark, the *scintilla conscientiae*, gives conscience its “imperative character.”²⁶ As John Paul II wrote in both *Dominum et vivificantem* and *Veritatis splendor*, “conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience.”²⁷ As an infallible law of God written in the heart of every human being, synderesis is nonnegotiable, an infallible and inextinguishable light, implied, according to Aquinas, by the Psalmist who cried out, “Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O Lord!”²⁸ Because I am a rational being, I must obey conscience. It is my sole guide. Newman underscored this point when he wrote that, “He who acts against his conscience loses his soul.”²⁹

These first principles known by synderesis serve as a magnetic force intended to guide all other knowledge towards the good. Benedict XVI speaks of this knowledge as “an inner ontological tendency” causing our very being to “resonate” with some things while it clashes with others.³⁰

The Subjective Dimension of Conscience: Fallible

If there exists an inner law moving man’s conscience to resonate with good and to clash with evil, why do some people seem to resonate with evil and clash with good? Two possible answers arise. The first would be to negate the infallible nature of the dictates of synderesis. Young Massimo’s situation illustrates this point, since even in his sinful act of fornication one can identify traces of his natural inclination towards love as *good*. However, in the particular instantiation of this love, he chose not objective good but an apparent good and objective evil. As such, his error poses no real threat to the argument of the inextinguishable nature of synderesis. But one might extend the question and ask whether we can say the same of those promoting transgender surgeries, homosexual unions, and other acts that Thomas Aquinas would define as “unnatural” sins.³¹ Do these acts not instead prove that synderesis can fail, at least at the level of these general instantiations of the natural law?

²⁶ VS 60.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (May 18, 1986), 43; VS 60.

²⁸ Psalm 4:6. The translation Thomas cites notes the passage as Psalm 4:7. He also renders the verb in the perfect: *signatum est*, as in the Vulgate, and not in the modern English conditional, as something still to be accomplished.

²⁹ Newman, 259. Newman credits Cardinal Gousset with stating this at the Fourth Lateran Council.

³⁰ Ratzinger, 32.

³¹ While all sins of lust are unnatural insofar as they are contrary to reason, Thomas adds a finer distinction between *natural* and *unnatural* sins of lust, here specifying as *unnatural*, those acts which are contrary to the venereal act. See *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 154, aa. 11-12.

Thomas raised this question in his *Summa Theologiae* and concluded, as already noted, that nothing can erase these general principles (the first principle of moral action – “Do good and avoid evil” – and, I would argue, the common proper principles) from the human heart. He did add a distinction as to secondary precepts. In the application of these general abstract principles to a particular action, reason can be hindered by concupiscence, which can either corrupt our natural inclinations by “vicious habits” or darken our natural knowledge by passion or sinful habits.³²

Thomas’s argument leads us to the second answer to the question of ‘whence resonance with evil and clashing with good.’ This second response affirms that *synderesis* cannot be deformed, and instead holds that formation of conscience implies another source of knowledge acquired by the practical intellect and used by conscience for its judgement of the particular act. Though these first principles provide an infallible and inextinguishable light, a vast expanse extends between first principles and each particular act in each particular moment.

Simply stated, error can enter as soon as discursive reasoning begins, which is why Aquinas concludes that although the spark remains, the secondary conclusions of the Natural Law can be “blotted out from the human heart,” and a man or woman will conclude that evil actions are good. Therefore, despite the grave distortions of nature promoted by the homosexual transgender agenda, their errors lie not at the level of the principle but in the conclusions drawn as one applies the general principles to the particular. At the root of these errors one can still discover traces of the common proper principles of the inclination towards sexual intercourse and care for offspring. Thus, we can confirm Jerome’s argument that this spark of conscience (*scintilla conscientiae*) persisted even in the soul of Cain (or Batman’s Joker) and in the soul that falls into the deadliest sin of despair,³³ or as Thomas claims, even the damned possess an inclination to the good.³⁴

³² *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 6. “Quantum ergo ad illa principia communia, lex naturalis nullo modo potest a cordibus hominum deleri in universali. Deletur tamen in particulari operabili, secundum quod ratio impeditur applicare commune principium ad particulare operabile, propter concupiscentiam vel aliquam aliam passionem, ut supra dictum est. Quantum vero ad alia praecepta secundaria, potest lex naturalis deleri de cordibus hominum, vel propter malas persuasiones, eo modo quo etiam in speculativis errores contingunt circa conclusiones necessarias; vel etiam propter pravas consuetudines et habitus corruptos; sicut apud quosdam non reputantur latrocinia peccata, vel etiam vitia contra naturam, ut etiam apostolus dicit, ad Rom. I.” Cf. Ia-IIae q77 a2; q85 a3 and *DV* q. 16, a. 3.

³³ Jerome, *Commentariorum in Ezechielem Prophetam*, 1.7, J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (Paris: Garnier, 1845) 25: 22. “[...] quae scintilla conscientiae in cain quoque pectore, postquam eiectus est de paradiso, non extinguitur.” Timothy Potts discusses Jerome’s position on Cain, distinguishing conscience and *synderesis*. *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, 9-11.

³⁴ *DV* q. 16, a. 3, ad. 5. “Sed bonum et inclinatio ad bonum consequitur ipsam naturam; unde manente natura, non potest inclinatio ad bonum tolli etiam a damnatis.” Cf. *DV* q. 16, a. 3, *resp.*; q. 16, a. 3, *sed contra* 2.

Thomas offers further support of this argument in his distinction between the speculative and practical reason and the relationship between general principles and logical conclusions. On the level of general principles, both speculative (e.g. non-contradiction or the whole is equal to the sum of its parts), and practical (e.g. choose the good and avoid evil), the principles are the same for all men and equally known by all. In the realm of speculative knowledge, the same is also true for conclusions drawn from the application of the general to the particular: the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180°, and this is true for every triangle and every person who measures the angles. However, when we speak of conclusions of practical knowledge, these are not the same for all men since one must account for various conditions that apply to the application of the general principle to the particular,³⁵ and also because of the multitude of conditions and the variety of obstacles including passion, evil habit, evil dispositions, etc., wherein error easily enters.

Newman pithily sums up the situation on *judicium conscientiae* and authority when he writes that our

‘sense of right and wrong,’ [...] is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous.³⁶

Formation of Conscience and the Gifts of Counsel and Wisdom

For Newman, this vulnerability of conscience dictates the “urgent” need for the assistance of the Magisterium in its formation, a topic that introduces the third notion of conscience as a power.³⁷ Despite its infallible spark, conscience is not a static judge. Rather, being of the intellect, it shares the end of truth and continually receives formation from family and friends, society and the media, the Magisterium, priests and confessors, and from one’s own passions, habits, experiences.³⁸ The fallibility of the majority of these teachers means they can deform as well as form my conscience. But deformity cannot be blamed solely on others for it is my intellect which gathers

³⁵ See *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 4.

³⁶ Newman, 253-254.

³⁷ Newman, 254. John Paul II addresses the role of the Church in formation of conscience see *Veritatis Splendor* 64.

³⁸ Servais Pinckaers speaks of the conscience seeking truth wherever it may be found, in Revelations, the Church, teaching and example of the saints, theologians and experts, and friends. Servais Pinckaers, “La coscienza e l’errore,” *Communio* (1993): 40-51 (51).

this information, interprets it, or possibly even chooses to set it aside, before arriving at a judgement.

To say only that the Church obliges me to follow my conscience is to stop short of the full truth clearly articulated in the *Catechism*: 1) I must follow my conscience; 2) by it I “assume *responsibility*” for my actions³⁹; 3) therefore it “must be informed and moral judgement enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful, formulating judgements in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator.”⁴⁰

Of Judgement and Free Choice

Responsibility introduces another important and controversial piece of the puzzle – human freedom. Considering the vastness of this topic, I note only three points from Aquinas. First, his definition of *libero arbitrio*; second, the relationship between *libero arbitrio*, *electio* and *iudicium conscientiae* (judgement of conscience); third, some comments on conscience in relation to human freedom and divine freedom.

Though often translated as ‘free choice,’ contemporary notions of freedom as an arbitrary choice of will isolated from reason bear little resemblance to Thomas’s *libero arbitrio*. For this reason, I prefer to retain the original Latin. Thomas hints at the importance of *libero arbitrio* by mentioning it in the *proemium* to the *Secunda pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, defining it simply as a faculty of the will and of reason.⁴¹ Previously, in *De Veritate*, he had more clearly specified that *libero arbitrio* refers not to the will absolutely, but as it is “ordered to reason.”⁴²

Thomas offers further insights into the proper role of *libero arbitrio* and its relationship to the intellect and the will in his discussion of the various stages of the moral act, specifically in the context of “choice” / *electio* (*STh* Ia-IIae, q. 13) and in his discussion of judgement of conscience (*iudicium conscientiae*).⁴³ As with *libero arbitrio*, when defining *electio* Thomas speaks of both intellect and will; *electio* is substantially an act of the will,⁴⁴ but one that is subsequent to a judgement of the

³⁹ CCC 1780 [italics original].

⁴⁰ CCC 1783.

⁴¹ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 1, a. 1. “[...] unde et liberum arbitrium esse dicitur facultas voluntatis et rationis.”

⁴² *DV* q. 24, a. 6, ad 1. “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod quia liberum arbitrium non nominat voluntatem absolute, sed in ordine ad rationem, inde est quod ad hoc significandum voluntas et ratio in definitione liberi arbitrii oblique ponuntur.”

⁴³ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 13; *DV* q. 17, aa. 1-2.

⁴⁴ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 1. “Et ideo electio substantialiter non est actus rationis, sed voluntatis, perficitur enim electio in motu quodam animae ad bonum quod eligitur.”

intellect.⁴⁵ This point logically follows from the fact that choice implies two or more possibilities.⁴⁶ When speaking of happiness as the final end of the human person, we do not speak of judgement or choice since it is not one among various possibilities.⁴⁷ Possibility enters only in the realm of particular acts which are virtuous and perfect man insofar as they are in accord with his final end. Particular acts include both judgement of conscience and choice.⁴⁸ But whereas conscience “consists in pure knowledge,” *libero arbitrio* consists in “the application of knowledge to the will.”⁴⁹ Consequently, we discover a logical ordering whereby *iudicium conscientiae* precedes *iudicium electionis*. One cannot choose without having knowledge of two or more possibilities and a judgement between them.⁵⁰ As Cardinal Caffarra argues, the very nature of free choice demands a *iudicium conscientiae*.⁵¹

One final element for a fundamental understanding of conscience and *libero arbitrio* is the relationship between human freedom and divine freedom. Conscience sits at the juncture of these two freedoms, accompanied by heated debate.

Many theologians who bear a good deal of responsibility for forming consciences in a post-*Humanae Vitae* Church struggle to find a balance between these two freedoms due to their inability to conceive of human freedom coexisting with any necessity, even one which is divine. A Church which proposes a moral law based on natural law and Revelation preaches constraint of human freedom. When faced with a conflict between necessity (the Church’s interpretation of divine law) and possibility (my judgement of conscience), freedom demands that the former must give way.

⁴⁵ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 1, ad 2. “Ad secundum dicendum quod conclusio etiam syllogismi qui fit in operabilibus, ad rationem pertinet; et dicitur sententia vel iudicium, quam sequitur electio. Et ob hoc ipsa conclusio pertinere videtur ad electionem, tanquam ad consequens.”

⁴⁶ Cf. *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 1, ad 1; Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 2, ad 1; Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 2, ad 2; a. 5.

⁴⁷ Cf. *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 3, ad 1; Ia-IIae, q. 1.

⁴⁸ *DV* q. 17, a. 1, ad 4.

⁴⁹ *DV* q. 17, a. 1, ad 4. “Differt autem iudicium conscientiae et liberi arbitrii, quia iudicium conscientiae consistit in pura cognitione, iudicium autem liberi arbitrii in applicatione cognitionis ad affectionem: quod quidem iudicium est iudicium electionis.”

⁵⁰ The notion of possibility does not negate freedom in the face of situations of obligation (a Catholic is obliged to follow the law forbidding abortion) or in responding to situations I did not freely choose (I have no choice regarding who is a member of my immediate family or my personality or natural strengths or weaknesses). As to the latter, Jacques Philippe speaks of the “paradoxical law of human life here: one cannot become truly free unless one accepts not always being free.” In such cases we still possess ‘freedom of consent’ whereby I consent or reject the situation. Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom* (Strongsville, OH: Scepter Publishers, 2007), 28.

⁵¹ Cardinal Carlo Caffarra, “The Autonomy of Conscience and Subjection to Truth” in *Crisis of Conscience*, ed. John M. Haas (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), 161, 164.

Franz Böckle is credited with naming this so-called “theonomous autonomy,”⁵² a theory he defines as “a proclamation of freedom from the restriction of alien authorities.”⁵³ Though he explicitly states that moral obligation is founded upon “God’s radical claim imposed on man,” he adds a caveat of radical import, claiming that everything depends on how God’s claim is understood.⁵⁴ Alfons Auer, another proponent of the theory, offers a minimalist interpretation of this claim. God, he says, in creating man as an autonomous moral being, made him “a law unto himself.”⁵⁵ As such, the only obligatory moral norms are those “developed by himself through the power of his reason.”⁵⁶ One cannot consider any external moral norms, including those of the Church, as binding. In their earnestness to defend freedom, proponents of theonomous autonomy reject divine necessity, but at the same time negate divine possibility, a topic we will return to below. We do well to remember Christ’s proclamation of the Spirit who “will *prove* the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement.”⁵⁷ The Greek ἐλέγξει is often translated as “convince,” but can also mean rebuke and admonish, an interpretation which accords with John Paul II’s preference for an authentic or participated theonomy, one in which man does not create or define the law and truth, but rather participates in the law “by the light of natural reason and of Divine Revelation” and freely submits “to the truth of creation.”⁵⁸

The Gifts

Having addressed fundamental principles of conscience and its formation, the next logical step in a Thomistic treatment of conscience and truth would be to speak of the virtue of prudence, *recta ratio agibilium* (right reason in action). Here, I will presume rather than negate the necessity of prudence and move directly to a discussion of the necessity of the gifts of counsel and wisdom which assist prudence in the formation of conscience. Also presumed is the necessity of virtues, both theological and infused, which accompany sanctifying grace and guided by

⁵² Many credit Böckle with coining the phrase. See Franz Böckle, “Theonomie Autonomie: Zur Aufgabenstellung einer fundamentalen Moraltheologie” in J Grundel, R Rauh, V Eid, eds *Humanum: Moraltheologie im Dienst des Menschen. Festschrift für R. Egenter* (Düsseldorf: Partmos, 1980). A few other notable members of the “theonomous autonomy” school include Alfons Auer, Josef Fuchs, Bruno Schüller, and James Keenan.

⁵³ Franz Böckle, *Fundamental Moral Theology* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1980), 5-6.

⁵⁴ Böckle, 5.

⁵⁵ Alfons Auer, Hat die autonome Moral eine Chance in der Kirche?, in *Moral begünden/Moral verkünden*, ed. G. Virt (Vienna, 1985), 11.

⁵⁶ Auer, 11.

⁵⁷ Jn 16:8.

⁵⁸ VS 41.

infused prudence perfect the powers of the soul such that they can perform acts proportionate to man's supernatural end. My argument instead focuses on the fact that in the Christian life even these infused virtues are insufficient and eventually limp, not due to any lack in the Holy Spirit who is cause of both infused virtues and gifts, but rather, due to the weakness of the human power.

Thomas identifies virtues, both acquired and infused virtues, as "habits whereby the appetitive powers are disposed to promptly obey reason."⁵⁹ He further notes that one can identify the gifts of the Holy Spirit as virtues since they also perfect man's powers in some way,⁶⁰ and adds that the infused virtues can be called 'gifts' insofar as they are infused by the Holy Spirit.

These similarities aside, Thomas proceeds to note significant distinctions of essence and modality between infused virtues and gifts. Key points of Thomas's argument for the necessity of the gifts include, first, that the perfection wrought through infused virtues, though supernatural in its cause, remains insufficient and falters before the highest science of God. In *De Caritate* Thomas argues that "the gifts perfect the virtues by elevating them above a human mode of action."⁶¹ The gifts are unfettered by human reason and instill in man a docility to divine inspiration, with a readiness "to promptly obey the Holy Spirit."⁶² Hence, Thomas attributes to the gifts a divine motion distinct from the human motion of the infused virtues.⁶³

⁵⁹ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 3, *resp.* "Virtutes autem morales habitus quidam sunt, quibus vires appetitivae disponuntur ad prompte obediendum rationi."

⁶⁰ John Berkman discusses Thomas's teaching, comparing what he refers to as virtue-habitus and gift-habitus and the related topic of natural and divine instinct. See Berkman, "Aquinas's Ethics beyond Thomistic Virtue Ethics: The Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Spiritual Instinct, and Complete Human Perfection" *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2023): 47–92.

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Caritate* (DC) a cura di P. Bazzi, M. Calcaterra, et.al. (Romae: Taurini, 1949), q. 1, a. 2, ad 17. "Ad decimumseptimum dicendum, quod dona perficiunt virtutes elevando eas supra modum humanum, sicut donum intellectus virtutem fidei, et donum timoris virtutem temperantiae in recedendo a delectabilibus ultra humanum modum." In the same article Thomas adds a caveat as to charity which, he says, exceeds all the virtues and gifts. "Sed circa amorem Dei non inest aliqua imperfectio, quam oporteat per aliquod donum perfici; unde caritas non ponitur donum virtutis, quae tamen excellentior est omnibus donis." This topic is more pertinent to the discussion of the gift of wisdom below.

⁶² *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 3, *resp.* "Unde et dona spiritus sancti sunt quidam habitus, quibus homo perficitur ad prompte obediendum spiritui sancto." See also *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, aa. 1 and 2. For further discussion on this topic see Barthélemy Froget, O.P. *De l'habitation du Saint-Esprit dans les âmes justes*, troisième ed. (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1900), 378-424. The translations come from the 1955 English edition: *The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Souls of the Just* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1955), 203-227. See also Bernard Blankenhorn's discussion of the historical debates surrounding Thomas's discussion on the causality of the gifts. Bernard Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2015), 270-280.

⁶³ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 8. "Dona autem spiritus sancti sunt quibus omnes vires animae disponuntur ad hoc quod subdantur motioni divinae."

Second, divine inspiration preserves man from “all foolishness, ignorance, dullness of mind and hardness of heart.”⁶⁴ In light of this disparity between human frailty and the heights of perfection to which man is called, Barthélemy Froget, O.P., speaks of the imperative nature of this “divine impulse.”⁶⁵ Third, the divine motion of the gifts does not negate human freedom; rather, while freely cooperating with divine inspiration, man remains passive in some way as his intellect is elevated to a higher way of knowing, understanding, and judging.⁶⁶ Fourth, Thomas notes that even Aristotle acknowledged that man, moved by divine instinct [*instinctum divinum*], has no need to consult human reason. Instead he follows an interior instinct [*interiorum instinctum*] which “is moved by a better principle than human reason,” that is, the gifts perfect man such that he can perform acts which surpass acts of virtue.⁶⁷

Finally, Thomas argues that this docility to the divine brings with it a higher level of certitude. Prudence, whether acquired or infused, is aided by the allied virtues of *gnome* and *synesis* which perfect judgement. But the certitude of such a judgement based on human reason, even if aided by the Holy Spirit, is one of probability, or prudential certitude. God offers man a higher certitude which Thomas identifies as “*instinctu spiritus sancti*,” give to the children of God who are led by the Spirit.⁶⁸ This is the Spirit who “helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”⁶⁹

Counsel

This discussion of divine instinct and docility to the Holy Spirit applies to all the gifts but is particularly relevant for our discussion of the gift of counsel and formation of conscience.⁷⁰ Conscience, as noted, is a judgement about particular acts;

⁶⁴ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 2, ad 3. “Sed Deus cuius scientiae et potestati omnia subsunt, sua motione ab omni stultitia et ignorantia et hebetudine et duritia et ceteris huiusmodi, nos tutos reddit.”

⁶⁵ Froget, 227-228.

⁶⁶ See *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 1, and *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 3, ad 2.

⁶⁷ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 1. “Et philosophus etiam dicit, in cap. *De bona fortuna*, quod his qui moventur per instinctum divinum, non expedit consiliari secundum rationem humanam, sed quod sequantur interiorem instinctum, quia moventur a meliori principio quam sit ratio humana. Et hoc est quod quidam dicunt, quod dona perficiunt hominem ad altiores actus quam sint actus virtutum.” Servais Pinckaers addresses Aquinas’s use of *instinctus* as to the movement of the Holy Spirit in “Morality and the Movement of the Holy Spirit” in *The Pinckaers Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 385-395.

⁶⁸ Romans 8: 14. Thomas cites Paul’s words both in *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 3 and *In Tertium Sententiarum* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenico, 2000), d. 35, q. 2, a. 4, q1a. 1c. “Et ideo oportet quod ad hanc certitudinem mens eleveatur supra humanum modum instinctu spiritus sancti: *qui enim spiritu Dei aguntur, hi filii Dei sunt*, Rom. 8, 14, et ideo consilium est donum.”

⁶⁹ Rm 8: 25.

⁷⁰ Stuart Chalmers offers a fine treatment of conscience, concluding with a discussion of the gifts and “connatural conscience” in his *Conscience in Context* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2014).

prudence is putting judgements of right reason into action. But if reason is limited in the supernatural realm, so too is conscience. Following this line of reasoning, Benoît-Henri Merkelbach, O.P., proposes a “supernatural conscience” defined as a judgement of whether or not a particular act merited supernaturally.⁷¹ Merkelbach holds that the supernatural conscience does not destroy but includes and perfects the natural conscience. Though I agree with Merkelbach’s principles, I believe a discussion of formation of conscience is better served by clarity as to the role of the gift of counsel than by positing a new level of conscience.⁷²

This gift of counsel, like prudence, the gift of counsel is the Holy Spirit’s guidance as to reasoning about particular acts. The gift, however, far exceeds the virtue since by counsel “man is directed as though counselled by God.”⁷³ It is this excellence that inspires Thomas to raise an objection: is counsel be identified as a gratuitous gift – a charism given only to a few? He rejects this position outright, arguing instead that the gift is “common to all the saints: since God counsels them as to the things necessary for salvation.”⁷⁴

We can examine this point in the context of young Massimo’s struggle with chastity: His decision to go to confession indicates a judgement of conscience and something of prudence directing his actions towards an objective good. Once there, the priest assisted in offering further information for the formation of his conscience. What he had previously judged to be moral, he now understands to be a sinful act. His world has been overturned. Reflecting discursively on this new knowledge led him into dialogue with Sister, who offered options for avoiding sin in the future, including separating or marrying the young woman. Massimo faced a dilemma of having to decide whether to continue his life of sin, to move out, or to propose to and to marry his girlfriend. Though his conscience may rebuke him as to the first option, the other two pose the risk of his losing the woman he loves. Reflecting on advice with the aid of grace, he could, even without the gift, freely choose one of the virtuous options, which would make absolution possible. With the gift of counsel

⁷¹ Benoît-Henri Merkelbach, O.P., “Treatise on Conscience in General,” trans. Matthew Miner in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2022), 347.

⁷² Merkelbach’s presentation is problematic in its lack of clarity between the realm of infused virtue and gifts. He identifies prudence as the immediate principle of the supernatural conscience with the theological virtues and gifts as mediate principles. He seems to imply that the Holy Spirit’s motion in the gift of counsel is limited by infused prudence which undermines the divine motion and inspiration of the gifts. See Merkelbach, 350.

⁷³ *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 52, a. 1, ad 1. “Quod fit per donum consilii, per quod homo dirigitur quasi consilio a Deo accepto.”

⁷⁴ *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 52, a. 1, ad 2. “Sed quod aliquis a Deo consilium habeat quid fieri oporteat in his quae sunt necessaria ad salutem, hoc est commune omnium sanctorum.”

would, however, despite the obstacles involved, he would more easily navigate the difficulties and arrive at a decision with greater certitude.

Massimo's dilemma has practical import for our discussion, both from the first-person and second-person perspective. In our contemporary world individuals daily face a variety of dilemmas each day, whether they be issues of infertility, gender dysphoria among family or friends, medical dilemmas for terminally ill or elderly, business ethics issues, or the new unknowns of AI, to name only a few. Dilemmas may differ, but the necessity of the gifts remains. In fact, even the ancient dilemmas we find in Scripture teach us how divine counsel can bring resolution.⁷⁵ Imagine Moses at the Red Sea.⁷⁶ As he and the Israelites arrived at the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his army on their heels, they surely took counsel together and, we can imagine, discerned as to various options. Two options, either attempting to cross the sea or pitching battle with Pharaoh's army, were mere foolishness bringing certain death for innumerable Israelites. A third option, that of returning to slavery under Pharaoh, may have seemed the only rational choice.

With human counsel exhausted, the Scriptures tell us that God revealed to Moses a fourth possibility – the parting of the Sea, whereby the Israelites could safely pass through on dry land. Cardinal Caffarra sees Moses' experience as an example of human necessity meeting divine possibility.⁷⁷ Left to his own devices, despite creativity, virtue, advances in human intelligence (and AI), creativity, and virtue, man's responses to dilemmas are limited. Only fidelity to the "necessity" of the divine plan destroys the bounds of human possibility and opens the way to new options, the divine possibility of the sea parting and our arrival at true freedom, freedom which includes a properly formed conscience aided by the infused theological and moral virtues, but which also extends to participation in a perfection of supernatural operations.

⁷⁵ Froget uses the example of Josephat from 2 Chronicles 20:12, 15-27. King Josephat finds himself facing a vast army of the Moabites and Ammonites, with the Israelites incapable of retreat or hope of survival. In desperation he cries out to God, "We do not know what to do." God responds by sending a prophet who tells Josephat and the Israelites not to worry. The battle is not theirs, but God's. The next day, in difficult skirmishes Josephat could never have imagined, the enemy is routed. I would also note the dilemma St. Joseph faced when he found out about Mary's pregnancy. Should he follow the law and condemn to death the woman promised to him in marriage or divorce her quietly? The angel resolved Joseph's doubts telling him not to fear to take Mary as his wife, whereby he becomes the foster father of the Son of God.

⁷⁶ Cardinal Caffarra employs this pericope for his discussion of conscience and freedom. See Caffarra, 159-160.

⁷⁷ Caffarra, 160.

Even here, at the level of the gifts, conscience and freedom accord with universal laws. Today many who reject universal law in an attempt to defend *libero arbitrio* and conscience actually destroy true freedom. Consider Moses' position from a solely first-person perspective. Prior to making a choice he first took counsel, examining all the possible options – both good and evil. He judged the possibilities in these particular circumstances present to himself – as a personal “I” – in that moment. These included his passions, knowledge of the dangers of the sea and of war against Pharaoh, and his responsibility to the Israelites. Each of these particular elements, both individually and as a whole, were insufficient for a proper judgement of conscience. They required reference to a universal. One cannot arrive at: “I must do this”; “This is good for me”, without a notion of a good and a transcendent necessity. Without the universal there is no “must,” only “I.” We prove this every time we declare, “I must.” The statement presents the truth of my choice not only before others, but also before myself. Even Moses, moved by the divine impulse of the gift of counsel, judged this new fourth option of passing through the sea as being a true good, in accord with the universal law and God's plan of divine necessity. This conformity of his particular knowledge with the universal good rendered Moses' choice truly free and truly human; as choice of a true good it conformed with his rational nature and enabled him to serve as an instrument to God's plan of bringing the Israelites to freedom.

The Need for Wisdom

As for the Israelites, their fear of death moved them to follow Moses through the Red Sea, but their docility to his commands did not last. Numerous times throughout the EXodus we hear of their stubborn rejection of Moses' counsel, a stubbornness we still witness in the Church today. Many resist the counsel of the Magisterium, of clergy, of fellow Christians. In guiding the stubborn Israelites to the Promised Land Moses needed more than the gift of counsel. He also needed the gift of wisdom to communicate the truth to others. The path to the promise land for Moses and for each of us, requires more than counsel on the level of first-person conscience (examining and forming my own conscience for my personal life). Contemporary dialogue with Catholics and non-Catholics requires consideration of a second-person perspective which considers my interlocuter. I must not only be docile to the Spirit's counsel to discern rightly as to the truth, I also require the gift of wisdom, a docility to communicate the truth in charity to others, and... I must pray that my interlocuter is docile to the same *instinctum divinum*.

A story of St. Dominic's life exemplifies all three steps. We are told that as a young Canon traveling through Southern France – stronghold of the Albigensian

heresy - Dominic spent an entire night in a tavern arguing with the Albigensian innkeeper. The story reveals that Dominic did not merely preach to the innkeeper. Guided by the Spirit he listened; he learned what the heretic believed; he responded. And guided by the Spirit, the Albigensian listened; he learned; he responded ... and he converted. There is a reciprocity in the formation of consciences.

Unlike the Albigensian our contemporary interlocutors may reject the truth presented, but they may not always bear full blame. I can be a cause of their rejection of truth if in my zeal I strip the truth of charity. This 'pastoral error' can occur in various ways.⁷⁸ Recall Paul VI's well-known adage that "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."⁷⁹ Those wishing to communicate truth must also live it themselves.

Joseph Ratzinger addressed the problem of contemporary pastoral error from a slightly different perspective. He noted an unhealthy tension between orthodoxy (right teaching) and orthopraxis (pastoral care emphasizing the moral life), often accompanied by a dangerous separation of faith and morals.⁸⁰ While many lay the blame for contemporary errors at the feet of preachers and theologians who sacrifice orthodoxy to orthopraxis, Ratzinger cautions those who favor orthodoxy to the detriment of orthopraxis. They speak *truth*, he says, but in such a way that they often make 'orthodoxy' seem questionable.⁸¹

His teaching highlights the need for true dialogue where 'teachers' (and listeners) are docile to divine instinct received in both the gift of counsel and the gift of wisdom which corresponds to the theological virtue of charity. *Caritas in veritate*.

*The Gift of Wisdom*⁸²

Aristotle and Aquinas both agreed that the greatest happiness requires the greatest virtue, which in turn must correspond to the highest operation.⁸³ In

⁷⁸ I use the term 'pastoral' in a general sense, applicable to any Christian involved in teaching another person on moral principles, whether formally or informally.

⁷⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 41; citing his own "Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis" (2 October 1974).

⁸⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, "Magisterium in the Church: Faith, Morality" in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 2: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*, eds. Charles Curran and Richard McCormick (NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 174-189.

⁸¹ Ratzinger, "Magisterium in the Church," 174.

⁸² These paragraphs discussing Thomas's definition of wisdom was presented in a talk entitled "The Conformity between 'Ius' as the Object of Justice and the Virtue of Charity according to Aquinas" presented at the Conference *The Concept of Ius in Thomas Aquinas*, 21-22 April, 2023, at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing,

man this highest operation is identified as the highest act of the intellect, which is contemplation, and contemplation of the highest truth, which is wisdom.⁸⁴ Through wisdom man knows something of the highest cause, and by this he is able to judge and “set in order” that which he judges according to human reason.⁸⁵

Despite the excellence of human wisdom, which stretches towards the highest cause, like other virtues it falls short of knowledge of the highest cause as the Trinitarian God who is *sapiens simpliciter*, judging and ordering “all things according to the Divine rule.”⁸⁶ Only the gift brings man both to knowledge of God as highest cause and to the possibility of judging rightly about Divine things because one judges them according to Divine truth.⁸⁷ Wisdom, as Thomas teaches, “implies a certain rectitude of judgement in accord with divine reason,” due to perfect use of reason and connaturality.⁸⁸

The perfect use of human reason for judging human things corresponds to the intellectual virtue of wisdom; the judgement according to connaturality pertains to wisdom as gift of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁹ Man’s connaturality for judgement of Divine things is a result of charity since charity unites us to God.⁹⁰ Only insofar as man is united with God in charity does he acquire the ability to “measure” according to right judgement, for only then does he judge according to God’s laws.⁹¹ Thomas concludes that wisdom is *caused by charity*. It is the union with God which reveals the mysteries of Divine wisdom.⁹²

Conclusion

Though the gifts soar to the heavens, they do not dwell solely in the mystical realms. The Spirits gifts of counsel and wisdom are sure guides as we seek to communicate truth in our daily dialogue with the contemporary world. In his two

2014), 186 (X, 1177b). Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics [CNE]*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P., vol 2. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 907-908 (nn. 2083-2087). See also *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 3, a. 4-5; Ia-IIae, q. 5, a. 7.

⁸⁴ CNE, 908 (n. 2090). “Inter omnes autem operationes virtutis delectabilissima est contemplatio sapientiae, sicut est manifestum et concessum ab omnibus.” See also *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 3, a. 5; Ia-IIae, q. 3, a. 8; *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 4, a. 8 *sed contra*.

⁸⁵ See *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 1; Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 2.

⁸⁶ *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 1.

⁸⁷ See *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 1, ad 2 and 3.

⁸⁸ *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 2.

⁸⁹ *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 2. See also *STh* Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 5.

⁹⁰ See *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 2.

⁹¹ In *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 5, Thomas uses the phrase “*sortiuntur de recto iudicio*,” which can be translated as “measure of right judgement.”

⁹² See *STh* IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 2; IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 2, ad 1; IIa-IIae q. 45, a. 4; IIa-IIae, q. 45, a. 6, ad 2.

documents on charity, *Deus caritas est* and *Veritas in caritate*, Benedict XVI wrote of the relationship between truth and charity. Truth, he said, “is not something that we produce, it is always found, or better, received.”⁹³ He added that truth is like love in that both are “neither planned nor willed, but somehow impose[d...] upon human beings,” without negating freedom.⁹⁴ Because dialogue demands first-person and second-person formation of conscience, successful dialogue of truth, particularly the highest truths, demands the gifts of counsel and wisdom and *instinctum divinum* that makes both speaker and listener docile to receiving this truth in love.

Dialogue is not only about challenging the consciences of others, but about challenging our own consciences.⁹⁵ If we wish to dialogue with others we must first enter into dialogue with Revelation, allowing it to challenge our consciences, not only as to *what* Christ taught, but also *how* he taught it to his friends and enemies. He intended that all should become his friends, and to this end he sent the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes us friends of God, but also assists us as we try to bring this friendship to others. Only with his help, Thomas reminds us, will be able to ‘speak’ the mysteries of the Kingdom,⁹⁶ without anxiety despite adversity and attacks.⁹⁷ Only the Spirit can bring us and work through us to bring others to the freedom of the sons of God.⁹⁸ **PS**

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Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 34.

⁹³ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 34.

⁹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 34, citing *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 3.

⁹⁵ Servais Pinckaers speaks of conscience “pushing us” to discover all the sources of truth available to us. Pinckaers, “La coscienza e l’errore,” 51.

⁹⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) IV, ch. 21, 6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, ch. 22, 3. Servais Pinckaers notes how the spiritual instinct of the gifts of the Holy Spirit “guides our choices, suggests initiatives, guards us from dangers, and helps us to surmount errors.” Pinckaers, “Morality and the Movement of the Holy Spirit,” 391.

⁹⁸ Rm 8:21. See SCG, IV, ch. 22, 6. Thomas offers as further support the following Scriptural passages: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17); and: “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (Gal. 5: 18).

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