

Conscience
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Introduction

We might begin with this anonymous *Prayer for Teachers* I once found.

Enable me to teach with Wisdom
For I help to shape the mind.

Equip me with Truth
For I help to shape the conscience.

Encourage me to lead with Vision
For I help shape the future.

Empower me to form my students with Love
For I help to shape the world.

Amen.

There is little doubt that communities of Catholic schools, of which our Jesuit schools are a sub-set, are concerned with a formation of conscience as well as heads and hands.

But this is how I intend to approach the topic, giving some theoretical underpinnings, then some applications in schools (for both students and staff members):

- 1 Some introductory remarks
- 2 Conscience and character in forming students
- 3 The Jesuit context in our schools
- 4 Conscience – a psychological consideration
- 5 Conscience – a theological exploration
- 6 Conscience and authority
- 7 Opportunities to shape consciences
- 8 Social conscience
- 9 The ethos of our schools

By way of issues and examples, I want to open up some areas beyond the classroom as well. As you see, I would like to cover some theological underpinnings. As well, I want to give you some examples of how this topic might even impinge upon your professional life as a teacher in a Catholic school.

Of course, we Catholics are not the only faith tradition to hold the place of conscience centrally. Here is a brief reflection I have always been drawn to, written in 1925 by Mahatmas Gandhi, called *The Seven Social Sins*:

Politics without principle
Wealth without work
Commerce without morality
Pleasure without conscience
Education without character
Science without humanity
Worship without sacrifice.

The SIPEI paper on conscience explores its meaning in some of the eastern religious traditions. But within the Catholic tradition, there is a long-standing development of conscience in the realms of faith and morals.

Conscience is one of those words like “sin”. Often used but sometimes little understood. One American moral theologian I was once reading said “trying to explain conscience is like trying to nail jello to the wall. Just when you think you have it pinned down, parts of it begin to slip away.”

Outside of any *religious* framework, there are people who take decisions in conscience from a philosophical or ethical point of view. When I was a high school then university student in the hurly-burly of the Vietnam War and conscription years, the term “conscientious objector” was part of the parlance. Depending on your point of view, these twenty-year old conscientious objectors were referred to as “conchoes”, or heroes, or (often) “commies”. That may have been my first experience of witnessing a decision in conscience which came with a cost.

Prior to that conscription era, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights had already declared that an individual had the right to refuse to perform military service

on the grounds of freedom of thought, conscience, and/or religion. But in this conflict, a number of those called up claimed conscientious objection, not to *all* war, but to this *particular* war in Vietnam.

Interestingly in 1967, American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, defended this particularly specific type of conscientious objection: "the issue of selective conscientious objection, conscientious objection to particular wars, or as it is sometimes called, discretionary armed service". Alas, our 1964 National Service Act did not recognize such nuances and those that held this position went to military prisons.

A further subtlety was advanced much later in 1998 by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights when they officially recognised that "persons [*already*] performing military service may *develop* conscientious objections."

So, in this largely secular arena (if we can call it that), we see conscience viewed as something that was not static, that allowed for changing positions, and for subtle distinctions, as one reflected upon one's experience.

In more recent months we have listened to the debate about compulsory vaccination of children. Previously you could register objection with the Department of Human Services to your child being vaccinated because of "a personal, philosophical, religious or medical belief involving a conviction that vaccination under the National Immunisation Program should not take place." Now, all grounds for such exemption are closed. But it will be interesting to see if any parents still refuse and what consequences they might have to face. A weighing up of goods and values. A decision to make.

And only today, the Indonesian government has instructed its fishermen not to give assistance to asylum seekers they encounter on the sea. Scenarios abound.

So, it seems to me, that the issue of conscience, about coming to an ethical stance, about understanding another's position, about reflecting on what it is to be human, about being true to one's core beliefs, is not just a topical nicety confined to an RE Class. This is the domain of the classroom teacher, the mentor/tutor, the Housemaster, the Year Coordinator, the Deputy or Principal, or the coach.

“The coach?” you ask. Only recently, our MIC of Aths was asking me about a boy in his final year at school, who has trained so hard, whose times have been coming down, and for whom this would be the last opportunity for him to represent his school in the Aths Carnival. But some coaches were pressing for another boy to be selected for his event, from an age group below, who could run that race and possibly be more likely to gain a place, gain points and therefore help secure the Senior Trophy. Whom should the coach select? A matter of conscience. I didn’t tell him what to do, but helped him tease out the issues.

Our students watch us like hawks, and are quick to detect discontinuities between what is lectured and what is lived out. As a teacher, I always need to check myself against that yardstick of Paul VI, forty years ago now:

“Young people of today listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”
Evangelii Nuntiandi ("On Evangelization in the Modern World"), 1975, n. 41

Within the classroom, opportunities to explore themes of conscience are never scarce. What if you were lucky enough to be teaching something like Robert Bolt’s, *A Man for All Seasons*. More’s daughter, Margaret, visits him in jail to persuade him to swear to the Act of Succession:

MORE: You want me to swear to the Act of Succession?

MARGARET: “God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth.” Or so you’ve always told me.

MORE: Yes.

MARGARET: Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.

MORE: What is an oath then but words we say to God?

MARGARET: That’s very neat.

MORE: Do you mean it isn’t true?

MARGARET: No, it’s true.

MORE: Then it’s a poor argument to call it “neat”, Meg. When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. (*He cups his hands*) And if he opens his fingers then — he needn’t hope to find himself again. Some men aren’t capable of this, but I’d be loath to think your father one of them.

Much scope here. And beyond classrooms and subjects, what about human rights advocacy groups? What about Housemasters regularly retelling the story of their patrons when there is an issue of heroic conscience to explore?

Conscience and Character

In educational circles, conscience is regularly linked to character formation. In a doctoral thesis submitted to Fordham University in 2008, wonderfully entitled *Jesuit High Schools as Communities of Character*, the author Miguel Gelpi analysed the literature and suggested that

“Character education literature points to character having three inter-related parts: moral knowledge, moral feeling and moral behaviour. *Moral knowing* involves moral awareness, knowing moral values, perspective taking, moral reasoning, decision-making, and self-knowledge. *Moral feeling* involves conscience, self-esteem, empathy, loving the good, self-control and humility. *Moral action* is competence, will, and habit. Moral action requires that, after reflection and thoughtful consideration is given to all the relevant facts and circumstances, persons actually have the will to act. According to the literature, in order to lead a good, moral life, all three of these elements are necessary. All three of these elements make up moral maturity.”

So there is *conscience* right in the thick of it. Furthermore, it is not too difficult to see the elements of Experience-Reflection-Action surfacing here as well. Gelpi goes on to say:

“According to character education literature there are four components or attributes that are generally found in a person of good character: a positive sense of self; a well-formed and active conscience; the skills of decision-making and choosing; and a variety of virtuous habits. Character influences how someone makes decisions or chooses to act. In general, it is a holistic term that deals with the entirety of a person.” (Pp 145-6)

The place of conscience again. And the Ignatian ideal of forming the whole person.

The Jesuit Context in Schools

When you pick up all the recent documents to do with Jesuit education, we find them outlining those key elements of our education. Firstly there was *competence, conscience and compassion*, then shortly after emerged *competence, conscience and compassionate commitment*. The most recent iteration of the Cs has seen commitment break free to become *competence, conscience, compassion and commitment*. Whatever of that evolution, the element of

conscience remains. But if you read that seminal document, *Ignatian Pedagogy: Practical Approach*, that element of conscience is not teased out in much detail at all. Perhaps it is simply assumed.

There *is* one brief mention in the JSEA document, *The Profile of the Grad at Grad* (the graduate of an American Jesuit school at the point of graduation) in its 2010 revision. Under the heading 'Religion', it firstly states that our schools are to be "respectful of the conscience and religious background of the individual". We have moved a long way from the principle once held by the Church that "error has no rights". So, first point, we encourage respect of positions taken in conscience.

Then the document goes on to say that "by graduation the student already is forming a Christian conscience, evaluates moral choices, and reasons through moral issues with increasing clarity." So the expectation is that we are in the business of helping to shape consciences, to give students practice in the exercise of conscience, proposing moral dilemmas, telling them stories of case histories of people who have acted in conscience.

Each year, as I take Year 12 classes, or have groups on Year 12 retreats and if I broach the topic of conscience they are surprised at the value it places on the person's integrity *vis à vis* the authority of the Church. They are genuinely surprised. "Why weren't we taught this before?" some ask. Possibly they were, but weren't ready to appropriate its significance. Perhaps they may not have been approaching the necessary Kohlbergian level to grasp it. They need to be taught it and reminded of it.

Conscience – a Psychological Consideration

Conscience is not just a *feeling*. It is not to be equated, therefore, with Sigmund Freud's *superego*, our psychic police officer. The superego aims for perfection and controls our sense of right and wrong, helping us to fit into society by getting us to act in socially acceptable ways.

You might feel guilty when, after taking on a diet to lose five kilograms before summer, you break your diet on the second day. At the office, even though you worked hard, you might feel guilty about going on vacation before your project was completed. These

feelings, though strong, are morally neutral and have nothing to do with conscience. This is a distinction anyone counseling students ought be aware of.

[Your handout includes a useful table for those who wish to explore this further.]

Conscience – a Theological Exploration

So let me say something about conscience.

When one *decides* to do this or that, or *not* to do this or that, one is acting out of conscience. Conscience is *the radical experience of ourselves as moral agents*. But since we never know ourselves completely (self-knowledge is something you work at and is not ready-made), decisions of conscience are necessarily incomplete and partial. And because our own circumstances are always historically, socially and culturally defined, decisions of conscience are necessarily fallible and subject to correction and change. The Church teaches that conscience is not infallible (*Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II).

Freedom of conscience, of course, does not mean “do what you will”. A Christian must do everything possible to have a properly-formed conscience. That goal presupposes a person is prayerful, reflective, virtuous and open to listening to/studying what the Church teaches.

A criterion of a mature moral conscience is the ability to make up one’s mind for oneself, about what I ought to do, about the person I should be. Note that the criterion says *decide for oneself*, not *by oneself*. It is a question of integrity, about being true to oneself. An ideal expressed poignantly by Martin Buber’s tale of Rabbi Zusya who illustrates the integrity of a conscience which is true to oneself, because out of fidelity to conscience will we be judged by God.

The Rabbi Zusya said a short time before his death, “In the world to come, I shall not be asked, “Why were you not Moses?” Instead, I shall be asked, “Why were you not Zusya?” That is, conscience demands one be true to oneself.

But conscience is no infallible guide. It can err through two kinds of ignorance. It sometimes errs through *invincible ignorance* (ie, ignorance for which we are not morally responsible). A person works in an international company, but is ignorant that most of the

items they market or assemble come from exploited communities in developing countries. Invincible ignorance. Or, only yesterday, when the Treasurer acknowledged the wives of two of his fellow ministers had been “double-dipping” in their maternity leave, but said the ministers had not been told by their wives they were so doing. Invincible ignorance. Nevertheless, such a conscience can or should still be followed.

This is in contradistinction to *culpable ignorance*, a deliberately ill-informed conscience for which the person is to blame. That person’s starting point is “I don’t care what the Church teaches ...”, “I’m not going to be bothered to enquire what moral theologians are saying on this matter.” Or imagine an accountant who does the books for someone who is rumoured to engage in underworld activities and you tell him basically, “I don’t want to know any details of these transactions of yours I am processing, just give me the figures.” Culpable ignorance. Such a person prefers to stay in ignorance, they can’t be bothered to find out what the truth might be. You are not at liberty to follow such a conscience. It is wrong to follow such a conscience.

So to have a properly informed conscience, one must seek out the Church’s tradition and teaching, pray and seriously reflect over it, try to bridge any gaps if such exist between that teaching and your own considered beliefs. Such matters are not to be treated lightly. Then one acts in good faith and good conscience.

But what if someone’s conscience is in error? Do we have any responsibilities? In general, a person should not be prevented from following an erroneous conscience, unless the action is seriously injurious to self, others, or the common good. Thus a person should be prevented from committing suicide. Or the law can enforce payment of a just wage, even if the employer is a conscientious *laissez-faire* entrepreneur. Or, recently in this State, a Muslim man can be arrested for marrying a twelve-year-old bride and having relations with her, even though he believes in conscience it to be a religious right.

Just how far we allow others to hold a differing view in conscience, and do not ourselves speak out against their position, is a moot point. My own experience is that our current cultural climate of “respectful tolerance” can often cultivate a certain relativism that suggests “your opinion is as good as mine”, that there are never any absolutes, reference

points or “lighthouse values”. This is so often to be heard among our young students. Tolerance is a value, certainly, but not an absolute. Our students need to be shown that a respectful multiculturalism should not be expected to, say, approve of the practice of foot-binding of young Chinese girls, or female circumcision in some African communities.

But getting back to one’s own position as a committed member of the Church. What is one to do in the face of Church teachings (usually moral teachings) with which one disagrees in conscience? A suggested way forward is:

- 1 The person must follow the dictates of conscience.
- 2 Since the Church has never claimed to speak infallibly on a moral question, there is probably no instance as yet in this domain of, (a) a person’s fallible decision of conscience, and (b) a Church teaching immune from error. [NB There has been talk at various times of some papal teachings like the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (prohibiting artificial contraception) and the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (precluding women’s ordination) as being “almost infallible”, but that is like speaking of someone being “almost pregnant”.]
- 3 No teaching of the Church can hope to account for every moral situation and circumstance. One is not repudiating the values affirmed in a particular teaching by deciding that it does not bind in a particular instance. For example, you might value truth telling, but decide in conscience, in a particular instance, it is justifiable to lie.
- 4 Teachings themselves are always historically conditioned and what may be deemed morally acceptable in one era or set of circumstances may not be so in another, or vice versa – eg, the Church’s (and society’s) changing views on slavery, usury, submission of wives to husbands.

Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, was one of the early theologians to write about the place of conscience.

Anyone upon whom the ecclesiastical authority, in ignorance of true facts, imposes a demand that offends against his clear conscience, should perish in excommunication rather than violate his conscience. (Thomas Aquinas, IV *Sentences*, dist 38, q2, a4)

In more recent times, the Church’s position is best summed up in the Vatican II document, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Conscience summons us to love good and avoid evil. In a beautiful image, the document defines conscience this way:

To obey [conscience] is the very dignity of the human person; according to it, the person will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There the person is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the person.

“Alone with God.” That’s pretty serious. And a bit scary. Not with mum or dad looking over your shoulder, or your *Catechism* in your hand, or the family solicitor or a priest whispering in your ear. Alone before God. No props. Just you and your integrity. We are finally judged by God on the basis of what is in our hearts, and before God.

How do you know when you have made a good decision of conscience? It is not unlike the sign that you have discerned well in the Ignatian tradition: One classic sign is *peace of mind*.

Conscience and Authority

The relationship between conscience and authority is inseparable. In most instances, they are not opposed since both seek the truth. But sometimes tension arises when authority asserts itself with the obligation to assent — for example the child’s relationship to its parents, or a soldier’s to the commanding officer, or a citizen’s to political authority, or a Catholic’s to magisterial or teaching authority.

Such tensions are not only a contemporary source of debate. Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman (who was very cautious about the declaration of papal infallibility in the First Vatican Council) famously wrote in a letter to the Duke of Norfolk:

"Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink, – to the Pope, if you please, – still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards."

Perhaps we should define a word here we will be employing frequently. *Magisterium* comes from the same Latin word for “master” that gives us our word “magistrate”. The magisterium is the teaching authority of the Church which belongs to some by reason of office (eg, the Pope and bishops).

The primary responsibility of the *magisterium* is to help us to understand the gospel for our times and to foster our assimilation of its basic values and truths. By attending to the teaching of the *magisterium*, we may be able to cut through conflicting voices, competing

images, and even our personal bias and rationalisations in order to hear the call of the gospel more clearly.

Let me take a moment to explain two more terms to you, which we will be employing.

Firstly there is the *ordinary magisterium* exercised by the Pope (with or without other bishops). The ordinary papal magisterium is capable of change.

There is also the *extra-ordinary* or *infallible magisterium* exercised by a Pope or by an ecumenical council. It means that the teaching on faith or morals is protected from fundamental error. The Pope is empowered with infallibility only when he is in the act of defining a doctrine of faith or morals, speaking *ex cathedra* as head of the Church with the clear intention of binding the whole Church. “No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such,” says Canon Law (can. 749, 3).

In recent years, we have had extensive discussions of the obligatory character of *non-infallible* teachings in moral matters. These discussions have shown that while a moral teaching may not be *defined* as infallible, this does not mean that such a teaching is up for grabs, or that it is meaningless, useless, or irrational. It means that even though these teachings remain subject to re-evaluation and the possibility of revision, the Catholic must still take them into account in the formation of conscience. The formula, “no infallible decision, therefore conscience decides” is a complete distortion of the real function of conscience. You wouldn’t expect to run a family on those lines, nor church community. Conscience needs to be informed. For example, as a parent you might set a 10:00pm curfew for your fourteen-year-old son. Just because it is provisional, and will probably be extended at a later time, doesn’t mean Fred need not take it seriously.

The key text for understanding a loyal response to magisterial teaching is from Vatican II:

In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a **religious assent** of soul. The religious **submission of will and of mind** must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*. (*Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (1964), n. 25*)

So what does “religious assent” or “submission of will and of mind” mean in moral matters? It means something more than either respectful silence or external conformity to

the teaching, and something less than the full commitment of faith. It calls for a serious effort to reach intellectual agreement that what is taught is an expression of truth. Also, it means that we must strive for a personal appropriation of the teaching so as to live by it out of personal conviction. Now a submission of this nature applies in other relationships to authority as well. It is not unique to our relationship to church authority. What is unique is the ground for such submission. The grounds here are religious ones. “Religious” assent or submission means that such effort and appropriation are motivated by the conviction that Jesus has commissioned the church to teach and that the spirit guides the church in truth. One of the world’s experts on the *magisterium* (a Jesuit, in fact!) Francis A Sullivan, puts it like this:

As I understand it, then, to give the required religious assent to the teaching of the ordinary magisterium means to make an honest and sustained effort to overcome any contrary opinion I might have, and to achieve a sincere assent of my mind to this teaching.

What is presupposed is that a person would receive the teaching openly, and always keep in mind that, in real uncertainty, the presumption is always in favour of the magisterium.

In their pastoral letter *Human Life in Our Day*, produced by the bishops of the United States in 1968, soon after *Humanae vitae*, discussed the norms of licit dissent:

The expression of theological dissent from the *magisterium* is in order only if:

- 1 the reasons are serious and well founded,
- 2 if the manner of the dissent does not question or impugn the teaching authority of the Church
- 3 and is such as not to give scandal. (n.51)

To move more personally, if you look at the contract you probably signed when you began teaching in a Jesuit school, you would see something of the above encapsulated in the expectations, more or less like this:

Context of the Catholic Church and the Society of Jesus

It is agreed that during your employment you shall –

- respect the teachings and values of the Catholic Church;
- support the philosophy, spirituality and pedagogical style of the Society of Jesus;
- and

- conduct yourself in a way which is consistent with these ideals.

So your life in good conscience outside the ambit of your professional life is to be respected. But the context of the school or the class is not a forum for promoting positions at odds with what the school or the Church upholds.

Interestingly, some theologians have changed their stance with regard to conscience and the *magisterium* over time. The following pronouncements by the then Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger are of interest:

Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official Church, also establishes a principle in opposition to increasing totalitarianism. (*Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Vorgrimler, 1968, on *Gaudium et spes*, part 1, chapter 1.)

and

Criticism of papal declarations will be possible and necessary to the degree that they do not correspond with Scripture and the Creed, that is, with the belief of the Church. Where there is neither unanimity in the Church nor clear testimony of the sources, then no binding decision is possible; if one is formally made, then its preconditions are lacking, and therefore the question of its legitimacy must be raised. (*Das neue Volk Gottes. Entwuerfe zur Ekklesiologie*, p. 144, Patmos 1969)

This is Ratzinger speaking at a time when his theology was clearly more liberal. It has been suggested that the student riots in Paris in 1968 and the student unrest in his own University in Tübingen, when a black-and-white world seemed suddenly grey, shaped his more conservative outlook thereafter. Who we are is so often recast by life experiences.

Not everybody, of course, sees the matter in such nuanced terms. In a speech given in Hamilton in 2003, then Archbishop George Pell said that, while individual conscience is important,

the "*misleading doctrine of the primacy of conscience should be publicly rejected*" and "*conscience has no primacy; truth has primacy*".

To make his point absolutely clear, two years later he gave an address at the University of Chicago on "Newman and the Drama of True and False Conscience", where he said:

“A Catholic conscience cannot accept a settled position against the Church, at least on a central moral teaching. Any difficulties with Church teaching should be not the end of the matter but the beginning of a process of conversion, education and quite possibly repentance. Where a Catholic disagrees with the Church on some serious matter, the response should not be "that's that; I can't follow the Church here"; instead we should kneel and pray that God will lead our weak steps and enlighten our fragile minds.”

And furthermore:

“A debased notion of conscience, a barely concealed enthusiasm for autonomy disguised as an appeal to the primacy of conscience, weakens our sense of obligation, damages our purity of heart, and makes it harder and harder to see God.”

It is worth teasing out what His Grace said. Yes, there are seeds of truth in what he says, but they are somewhat masked or hidden.

[These quotes are in your handout for later perusal if you wish. Additionally, some material is presented on a controversial matter in our Sydney schools not too long ago. In 2007, Cardinal Pell proposed that every school principal in the Archdiocese would make an Oath of Fidelity as a condition of employment. That oath, the Cardinal's proposal, the response of Fr Geoff King SJ (our Province canonist), and a statement of withdrawal of the proposal are in your handout for consideration of what amounted to a question of conscience. Worth considering by future school leaders like yourselves.]

Opportunities to Shape Consciences

A new word has crept into our parlance over the last few decades – “conscientise”. It has its roots largely in South America from Paolo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* assumes a Marxist approach. The word was subsequently adopted by liberation theologians. A number of years ago, the former British Jesuit Provincial, Michael Campbell-Johnson, one-time missionary in Central America and still a powerful and influential writer, was extolling others to “conscientise the non-poor”. An angry reader wrote to the *Tablet* at the time, suggesting that it meant “infecting European Catholics with guilt about a state of affairs in Latin America about which they can do almost nothing practical whatsoever”.

But conscientising is not about fuelling Catholic guilt, the Catholic superego. When I employ it, I take it to mean “prodding a conscience” or opening up new considerations for a conscience’s formation, or firing someone up when their conscience has been pricked after experiencing something profound or confronting.

In their formative years with us, we move boys from engaging solely in works of charity in their younger years, to include (as they develop intellectually, and then influentially) works of justice. The conscientising, especially in community service and immersions, should motivate them then to influence the centres of decision-making. *Experientia docuit*, as Ignatius wrote – experience teaches. In my experience, it is the constant refrain from parents of boys who return from Immersions. They say they now see and feel things differently.

I think that Pope Francis was, in part, referring to a need for conscientising in his recent encyclical:

The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ. (*Evangelii gaudium*, n 2)

Schools are privileged places to sharpen those “blunted consciences”. But at the other end of the spectrum, we sometimes speak about “easing our consciences”. That either means doing just sufficient to make ourselves feel a bit better, or else working out of our superego. Francis also referred to this in the same encyclical:

Reading the Scriptures also makes it clear that the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of “charity à la carte”, or a series of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The Gospel is about the kingdom of God (cf. *Lk 4:43*); it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society. We are seeking God’s kingdom: “Seek

first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33). Jesus' mission is to inaugurate the kingdom of his Father; he commands his disciples to proclaim the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 10:7). (*Evangelii gaudium*, n 180)

I recall when we first moved to Mount Druitt, in the lead up to opening Loyola College, I met a local and very prophetic Catholic figure there and a very good man, whose own life deeply shared the life of the poor. Yet he was nevertheless extremely protective of his people and resented "new kids on the block". In addition, had no time at all for Catholic education. When we met for the first time, he said to me, brusquely, "You Jesuits are only out here to salve your consciences." It was a hurtful accusation. And it was wrong.

Fr General Adolfo Nicolás SJ, in an address, *Challenges and Issues in Jesuit Education*, given six years ago on the 150th anniversary of the Ateneo de Manila school, presented a concept which, to me, blends the two Ignatian ideals of *magis* and discernment, along with conscience. He said (n.21):

In the end, the test of whether our education is one of depth, is whether we are able to produce people who can "decide from inside" — which is another way of saying, the test of our education as Jesuit education is if we are able to produce people of discernment. More and more, people are making choices, not from the inner realm of faith, conscience, values, truth, but from the seductive voices coming from the outside, of gain, profit, public opinion, convenience and fashion. People are becoming weaker in the habit of finding in the depths of the heart the answers to difficult emerging questions. On the other hand, if one looks at the alumni we are proudest of as products of the Jesuit educational system, I think we will find in them a certain of depth of perception, thinking, commitment, and character, and the habit of deciding from inside.

Social Conscience

A social conscience is a sense of responsibility or concern for the problems and injustices of society. While our personal conscience is related to our moral conduct in our day-to-day lives with respect to individuals, social conscience is concerned with the broader institutions of society and the gap that we may perceive between the sort of society that *should* exist and the real society that *does* exist.

This dimension of conscience is, of course, an intrinsic area of conscience formation in any Jesuit school. It is grounded in what we teach our students in social justice theory.

Different authors have produced many collations of the building blocks of Catholic social teaching. They include issues like: the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the person; principles of family, community, association and participation; the common good; the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of work and the rights of workers; solidarity; subsidiarity; and the stewardship of creation.

In the last century, social justice has become an increasing area of concern of Church teaching, encyclicals and statements of Bishops' conferences and the like. Here are just a few to consider, concerning international obligations:

On the part of the rich man, it calls for great generosity, willing sacrifice and diligent effort. Each man must examine his conscience, which sounds a new call in our present times. Is he prepared to support, at his own expense, projects and undertakings designed to help the needy? Is he prepared to pay higher taxes so that public authorities may expand their efforts in the work of development? Is he prepared to pay more for imported goods, so that the foreign producer may make a fairer profit? Is he prepared to emigrate from his homeland if necessary and if he is young, in order to help the emerging nations? (Paul VI, *Populorum progression*, #47, 1967)

And

The obligation to provide justice for all means that the poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation. (US Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, #86, 1986)

And more recently

With due respect for the autonomy and culture of every nation, we must never forget that the planet belongs to all humankind and is meant for all humankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity. It must be reiterated that "the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others". To speak properly of our own rights, we need to broaden our perspective and to hear the plea of other peoples and other regions than those of our own country. We need to grow in a solidarity which "would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny", since "every person is called to self-fulfilment". (*Evangelii gaudium* 190)

These days we expect to see in our school prospecti and websites, read in our mission statements and weekly newsletters, or hear referenced in Assemblies and Speech Days, this work of conscientising our students. We make it clear that we are about honing

consciences which direct one to act, encourage one to take a stand, challenge one to be prophetic. Even if that comes with a cost.

Fr Joseph McShane SJ is currently President of Fordham University. I enjoy reading the way he challenges his students. This the way he expressed the hopes he had for Fordham graduates:

“We want them to be bothered. We want you to leave here with a sense of responsibility to society, we want you always to be bothered always by the thought that there is injustice in the world. Do you know the old ... definition of a Puritan? A Puritan is someone who is bothered by the suspicion that somewhere, someone is happy. And I think for us at Fordham, we want our students to be bothered, haunted by the suspicion that somewhere, someone is suffering. We want them to be bothered.”

When I speak to new parents at dinners early in the year that their sons join us, I touch upon this dimension of a social conscience. I speak of ‘restlessness’, saying to them something like:

Here we are keen to create a certain restlessness in your sons. There is a tension that confronts any school in the Jesuit tradition, concerned as it is with the total formation of its students: The school must fulfil the expectations of those whom it serves (ie, satisfying the needs of government legislation, giving students excellent preparation for the next phase of studies or career, good grades in state or national exams) — of course. We never eschew excellence. But a school must also be countercultural, just as the Gospel is countercultural. It must disturb its students and the community around it. It must prick their consciences to make them want to change that which needs changing. It is that little burr we try to lodge under each boy’s saddle. A niggling restlessness that will not allow an Ignatian to rest easy, or be content, while another is treated with less than that full human dignity which is the right of all. It is a passion that sometimes challenges the *status quo*. Our students *will* have attitudes challenged and changed. They may even become change agents. In that process they may often leave the school with outcomes quite different to the expectations which either they or their parents had at enrolment. If so, that will be well within the ambit of the Jesuit tradition.

Our parents should have no mistake concerning the partnership they are forging!

Conclusion

I remarked at the beginning that conscience, as one of the ‘voices’ one listens to inside is a little hard to locate. When we speak of educating head, heart and hands, is conscience in

the head, or the heart, or a bit of both? Whatever, it is one of the voices within we profit by listening to.

In this vein, let me conclude with this poem by American Poet Laureate, Billy Collins. I think it captures something of this. It is called *Night House*.

Every day the body works in the fields of the world
Mending a stone wall
Or swinging a sickle through the tall grass –
The grass of civics, the grass of money –
And every night the body curls around itself
And listens for the soft bells of sleep.

But the heart is restless and rises
From the body in the middle of the night,
Leaves the trapezoidal bedroom
With its thick, pictureless walls
To sit by herself at the kitchen table
And heat some milk in a pan.

And the mind gets up too, puts on a robe
And goes downstairs, lights a cigarette,
And opens a book on engineering.
Even the conscience awakens
And roams from room to room in the dark,
Darting away from every mirror like a strange fish.

And the soul is up on the roof
In her nightdress, straddling the ridge,
Singing a song about the wildness of the sea
Until the first rip of pink appears in the sky.
Then, they all will return to the sleeping body
The way a flock of birds settles back into a tree,

Resuming their daily colloquy,
Talking to each other or themselves
Even through the heat of the long afternoons.
Which is why the body – the house of voices –
Sometimes puts down its metal tongs, its needle, or its pen
To stare into the distance,

To listen to all its names being called
Before bending again to its labor.

Those are the conversations we want to cultivate in the students who are committed to our care!