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God's Action in the World: Imagining Conscience as an Act of Friendship

La acción de Dios en el mundo: Imaginar la conciencia como un acto de amistad

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning, the creative work of God implied human agency. By following the voice of conscience, humans have been invited to an intimate collaboration with the Creator. And yet, when discussing God's activity in the world, the role of conscience is often neglected. Much attention is given to the rational and spiritual dimensions of conscience, but not enough emphasis is placed on its relational character, which results in difficulties when trying to explain the precise nature of the collaboration between God and humans. A new approach will thus be proposed, according to which conscience is seen primarily as an act of friendship. It will be argued that only in the context of a personal relationship between friends does conscience receive its full meaning and can adequately express man's active participation in the unfolding of God's creative act.

Keywords: Co-creation, conscience, creation, divine providence, friendship, John Henry Newman, morality, Saint Thomas Aquinas.

RESUMEN

Desde el principio, la obra creadora de Dios implicó la acción humana. Al seguir la voz de la conciencia, los seres humanos han sido invitados a una íntima colaboración con el Creador. Sin embargo, cuando se habla de la actividad de Dios en el mundo, a menudo se descuida el papel de la conciencia. Se presta mucha atención a las dimensiones racional y espiritual de la conciencia, pero no se hace suficiente hincapié en su carácter relacional, lo que genera dificultades a la hora de intentar explicar la naturaleza precisa de la colaboración entre Dios y los seres humanos. Así pues, se propondrá un nuevo enfoque, según el cual la conciencia se considera ante todo como un acto de amistad. Se argumentará que sólo en el contexto de una relación personal entre amigos la conciencia recibe su pleno significado y puede expresar adecuadamente la participación activa del hombre en el despliegue del acto creador de Dios.

Palabras clave: Amistad, conciencia, creación, John Henry Newman, providencia divina, Santo Tomás de Aquino, teología moral.

INTRODUCTION

Too often, reflections about God's influence over the world neglect the personal nature of the Creator. Whenever the question is posed, the human mind naturally tends to the transcendent, that is, to the consideration of the overarching *principle* that holds all things in existence and dictates their purpose. To the philosophers of old, this principle was known as the Nature itself; to the modern man, it is often equated with the force of Evolution; and to the Christians, it cannot be anything else, but God, the almighty Creator. In Catholic theology, specifically, in theology of creation, it is not uncommon to conceive of God as the omnipotent being, who alone possesses the fullness of existence.[1] It is a Christian doctrine to affirm that everything else that exists, exists solely because of God, and nothing—in the absolute sense of the word—exists outside of Him and his sphere of influence.[2]

As a result, much of what is said of God's action in the world takes the form of a detailed elaboration of His divine attributes. This is how St. Thomas Aquinas begins his *Summa Theologiae,* and this is how many theologians and philosophers approach the subject today. By scrutinizing God's essence as simple, good, perfect, infinite, and immutable, the fundamental parameters for the relationship between the Creator and the creature are established and analyzed. However, while laying down the metaphysical foundation is certainly critical for any orthodox account of God's influence over the world, one cannot forget that the God of Christianity is the God of love, and love is an act of person.

Creation, then, is not simply an act of emanation of the essence of some impersonal being—as perfect and good as it might be—but an *act of person*, more precisely, an act of *persons*, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who share in perfect communion of love and *freely will* that the rest of creation be a part of it. It is precisely for this reason that any attempt to speak meaningfully of God's interaction with the world has to assume a deeply personal character. It is not sufficient to speak of God's influence in terms of causes and ends. The omnipotent Creator, who holds all things in existence, is the *loving God*, who *actively thinks* and *desires* that the world continue to be and to develop.

This requires that, in addition to studying God's ways of governing the *world*, sufficient reflection is given to God's way of governing *human beings*—the

1 This fundamental truth is reflected primarily in the language of philosophy, which speaks of the created beings as subsisting in God, i.e., as having their being only insofar as they exist in God.

2 Cf. ST I, q. 44, a.1. and ST, q. 103, a. 4.

pinnacle of His creative work and one of the reasons for which the world came into existence in the first place.[3] Unlike other creatures, human beings can relate to their Creator on a *personal level*, which, through grace, makes them capable of responding to His love and collaborating with Him in His work of creation. This place of encounter, where the human creature experiences the voice of his Creator in the depths of his being, has traditionally been called conscience.

Thus, God's action in the world cannot be fully grasped unless proper attention is given to human conscience. Since its function is frequently misrepresented, however, both in practice and in theory, it is necessary to *reimagine it as an act of friendship*, that is, as something more than a capacity to apply the rule of law to particular circumstances; a genuine collaboration is needed between men and God, which implies the commonality of vision and a sincere desire to seek the good of all creation.

To articulate this perspective in greater detail, the article will first establish some basic parameters regarding God's creation and human agency. It will be shown that, from the beginning, God desired that human beings become His close collaborators in the ongoing act of creation and that the active participation in the Creator's work is dependent on the upright use of conscience. Then, the study will consider the limitations of the two most widely used definitions of conscience circulating in moral theology today—as an act of reason and as the voice of God. Without in any way departing from the Church's magisterial teachings, a need for a more personal perspective will be identified. And lastly, a new approach will be proposed, according to which God's loving plan for His creation is still experienced in the depths of man's conscience, but not as a mere rule of obligation but as an act of friendship perfected through grace. It will be argued that only in the context of a personal relationship between friends does conscience receive its full meaning and consequently leads to the committed activity of co-creating.

1. HUMAN AGENCY AND GOD'S DESIGN

Since the act of creation is essentially an act of personal love, it only makes sense that its proper finality is *another person.* Just like Adam could not find the fullness of meaning without Eve, creation would remain largely incomprehensible without the emergence of man. The Second Vatican Council grasped this truth

3 While it is evident from the progressiveness of God's creative action in Genesis that all visible things came to be because of humanity, this is not to say that therefore God needed to create human beings or that somehow, human beings, in virtue of bearing the divine image, merited their own creation.

when it affirmed that, in the order of creation, a human being is the only creature whom God wished for his own sake.[4] All other beings are inferior in that they cannot comprehend the loving intention of their Creator or respond to him with love. Only humans possess this capacity because only humans are *persons*, made in the image and likeness of the Trinity.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in His divine wisdom, God intended that humans assume the unique responsibility for His creation. Without relinquishing His absolute sovereignty, God told Adam and Eve to "fill the earth and subdue it"[5] and in doing so, he didn't ask them to merely cultivate the world they inhabited; the Creator *shared his creative power with his creature.* He invited human beings to become His close collaborators, or better yet, *co-creators*, who are to actively contribute to the process of the unfolding of creation:

> The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that *man,* created in the image of God, *shares by his work in the activity of the Creator* and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation.[6]

God's influence over the world is thus, in a certain sense, reliant on human activity—not in a way of limiting the divine power, but by allowing it to flourish and achieve its completion without obstacles.[7] This dependency is clearly depicted in Genesis, most notably in the section describing the creation of the garden of Eden. Though the heavens and the earth were already made, God *waits* to send down the rain to produce various plants of the garden because "there was no man to till the ground yet."[8] The garden, identified with a state of perfect harmony, comes only *after* the creation of man, who is then asked to "cultivate and care for it."[9] Even after the tragic events of the Original Sin, this desire of God does not change; man is still called to "till the ground from which he had been taken,"[10] although the task is now arduous and takes place outside of Eden.

4 GS, 24.
5 Gen1:28.
6 LE, 25
7 "God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out, He also makes use of his creatures' cooperation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of almighty God's greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of cooperating in the accomplishment of his plan." CCC, 306.
8 Gen 2:5.
9 Gen 2:15.
10 Gen 3:23.

Naturally, God's desire for human beings to share in his ongoing act of creation goes beyond their gardening skills.[11] While, as said before, nothing remains outside of the divine governance, things are ordered to God according to their natures. And so, for human beings, who are rational, sharing in the creative activity of the Creator means, first and foremost, *knowing* and *loving* God for Himself and other things for His sake.[12] This necessarily implies the right ordering of one's actions according to the mind of God. By knowing what is true and loving what is genuinely good, man not only realizes his own perfection but also becomes well-disposed to love everything that God has created and thus contributes to its flourishing. And inversely, by departing from the Creator's vision, man loses himself and, along with him, the rest of creation, as evidenced by the story of the Great Flood.[13]

The question, of course, becomes: How does man know what is authentically true and good in the age of misinformation and confusion? How can he cooperate with God in His grand project of bringing everything to Himself, if the culture seems so ungodly and deprived of any sense of faith? To answer these questions, we must now turn to the concept of conscience.

1.1. Human conscience: the center of man's moral life

The Church affirms that all men are capable of distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong. In the words of the Second Vatican Council,

> In the depths of his conscience man detects a law which he does not impose on himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience, can, when necessary, speak to his heart more specifically: 'do this, shun that'. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged.[14]

Conscience is therefore not a privilege of the few who possess faith, but a reality deeply embedded in human nature.[15] It is a place, where every man confronts *himself* in the depths of his own being; where he stands naked, as it were, before his

11 Though certainly the care for the physical part of the created world is of utmost importance as emphasized by Pope Francis in his recent encyclicals. See especially, *Laudato Si*, n. 84-95, and *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 17.

12 CCC, 1822.

13 The story of the Flood is most instructive as it illustrates just how far the consequences of man's moral choices reach, even leading God to "regret" the very act of creation. Cf. Gen 6:6-7.

14 GS, 16.

15 Rom 2:14-16.

own choices. If his decisions are good, that is, if they conform to the truth as discerned by reason, man himself becomes good; but if he fails and chooses what is evil, the same evil wounds him and takes hold of him. Thus, human conscience is the *source of moral identity*, the identity which, although often remains hidden from the world, is always known to man in the depths of his heart.[16]

All human actions pass through the court of conscience. This is because, in its essence, conscience is "*an act of a person's intelligence*, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation."[17] Conscience is thus a *practical capacity* by which man not only grasps the meaning of moral truth but also determines how to align his behavior in accordance with it in the concrete circumstances of his life. Indeed, without its light, one would simply not know how to act well.[18]

In *Veritatis splendor*, John Paul II emphasizes that the work of human conscience and God's plan for creation are intimately linked:

> The judgment of conscience [….] is a judgment which applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil. This first principle of practical reason is part of the natural law; indeed, it constitutes the very foundation of the natural law, inasmuch as it expresses that primordial insight about good and evil, that reflection of God's creative wisdom which, like an imperishable spark (*scintilla animae*), shines in the heart of every man.[19]

Collaborating with "God's creative wisdom" is therefore not a distant or impossible task. It happens each and every time man obeys the command of conscience, which inclines him to seek what is authentically good. To do what is right and shun what is evil *is* to collaborate with the will of the Creator and actively contribute to His divine work. Hence the Church's affirmation that the judgment of conscience should always be followed.[20]

This does not mean, however, that human conscience is always correct. One cannot forget that this "act of intelligence," as John Paul II calls it, belongs to a man affected by Original Sin. Indeed, only at the most generic level, known as

16 St. John Paul II expresses this truth even more emphatically when he says that "conscience is the *only* witness, since what takes place in the heart of the person is hidden from the eyes of everyone outside." (VS, 57).

17 VS, 32. Emphasis mine.

18 Though the Catechism points out that even the voice of conscience can be effectively muffled due to numerous distractions and lack of introspection. Cf. CCC, 1779.

19 VS, 59.

20 Cf. CCC, 1790.

synderesis, does man know intuitively and reliably how to choose well.[21] In all other scenarios, he is subject to ignorance, malice, and foul passions, which significantly impede his good judgment.[22] Thus, the Church reiterates the need for the formation of conscience, which consists primarily in turning back to God for an understanding of true good:

> The dignity of this rational forum [i.e., conscience] and the authority of its voice and judgments derive from the *truth* about moral good and evil, which it is called to listen to and to express. This truth is indicated by the "divine law", *the universal and objective norm of morality*. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good, whose attractiveness the human person perceives and whose commandments he accepts.[23]

The Holy Father's emphasis on the need to conform one's conscience to the objective rule of morality as expressed by the divine law cannot be overstated. Without the sense of objective truth, man quickly falls into an illusion of his own moral supremacy. But what is equally true is that human conscience *is able to know the fullness of moral truth*, and that once discovered, it actually presents itself as something *attractive* to the man. And this attractiveness is precisely the sign of God's desire for humanity to take an active role in the unfolding of His creative work. It is the "inner echoing" of the original command given to Adam and Eve to subdue the earth *with Him*. Whenever man's subjective sense of morality aligns with the demands of the objective moral order, man effectively *wills the will of the Creator*, in which he experiences not only his own perfection but the perfection of the mind of the One who created all things.

A well-formed conscience, therefore, *lies at the center of all creative activity*. It is where God communicates with men, inviting them to "complete the work of creation" and "perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors,"[24] and it is also where men come to hear the Creator's voice, either

21 According to Aquinas, *synderesis* provides only a basic grasp of the first precepts of practical reasoning, such as that good is to be sought and evil is to be avoided (cf. ST I-II, q. 94, a.2). As such, it might be helpful to think of *synderesis* as a natural inclination of human nature to the good in general and not yet as the power by which one determines the moral quality of a specific act. For a helpful overview of the concept, see: D. J. Billy, "Aquinas on the Content of Synderesis," *Studia Moralia* 29 (1991): 61–83.

22 Aquinas mentions these influences when discussing the four wounds of human nature following the authority of the Venerable Bede. Cf. ST I-II, q. 85, a. 3.

23 VS, 60.

24 CCC, 307.

accepting or rejecting His invitation. In short, conscience is a place of a *personal encounter*, an encounter of truly cosmic consequences.[25]

2. TWO WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT CONSCIENCE

The difficulty in proposing human conscience as a means of explaining God's action in the world is, of course, the fact that conscience is a widely misinterpreted term today. There exist many theories of conscience operative in various fields of study, and perhaps even more examples of an abuse of conscience in the world. However, a mere lack of uniformity of meanings or failure to live up to its demands do not abolish the critical role of conscience in moral discernment and, by extension, in God's governance over His creation. The real issue is making conscience "personal" again; that is, presenting it in a way that would truly affect people's hearts and make them *want to make an effort to form it*. This can only happen if the two dominant ways of thinking about conscience, as an act of reason and as the voice of God, are reimagined under the auspices of the virtue of friendship. It is important to add here that such reframing is not in any way meant to negate any of the original meanings. Conscience *is* an act of reason and the voice of God. However, it seems that in common practice, these two senses are often disjointed or inappropriately exaggerated. The following analysis is meant to discuss these challenges in more detail.

2.1. Conscience as an act of reason

As it was stated earlier, conscience is frequently defined by its reference to the intellectual nature of man. Conceived as an act of reason, conscience is thought primarily as a rational operation by which man comes to know "the moral quality of a concrete act." [26] The emphasis on rationality of conscience comes from the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, where a full account of human practical reasoning is presented.

For Aquinas, the human mind operates on two levels: speculative and practical. The first concerns the knowledge of things in themselves, the latter

25 This is not a mere figure of speech. Human activity, expressed through human conscience, has long been identified at the root of the ongoing environmental crisis. See, for example, John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 38, Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 51, Francis, *Laudato si*, 117.

26 CCC, 1778.

denotes an understanding of things as directed to action. For example, one can contemplate the nature of a mountain, its beauty, location, composition, etc., to understand better what it is, or one can study its nature for a given purpose, to exploit its minerals, build a tunnel through it, or go for a nice hike. "The particular end of speculative knowledge is the simple *contemplation of truth*. Conversely, the particular end of practical knowledge is *action*: operation or fabrication." [27] It is important to note here that these two modes of knowing reality often intertwine in a lived experience. In fact, speculative knowledge is necessary to think well practically (as one needs to know the structure of a mountain before drilling a tunnel through it), and though the inverse is not always the case, practical application often complements speculative knowledge (as the drilling through the mountain might discover things previously unknown about its structure).

Now, conscience is defined as "knowledge applied to an individual case."[28] Precisely because it is something *applied* and not just theoretical, it belongs to the realm of practical reasoning. Depending on the chronology of an act, conscience evaluates the moral rightness or wrongness of an act. At the most fundamental level, it enables a man to first see if the action took place or not.[29] Since one might not always be aware of what he has done or not done, conscience serves as a *witness*, making a person cognizant of the actions he has committed. If the actions already occurred were good, conscience is said to *excuse* a person; if they were bad, they *accuse* her instead. It can also *incite* one to act in relation to a future good or *bind* him, if the object of an act is evil.[30]

There are six stages of the practical decision-making process: (1) simple volition, (2) intention, (3) counsel, (4) judgment, (5) command, and (6) fruition.[31] The work of conscience extends to stages (1) through (4) and to the whole process, if it is perfected by prudence.[32] However, since the beginning of the practical movement has to be explained somehow, Aquinas further specifies that the first two stages belong properly to *synderesis*, or "a natural habit of first principles of action." [33] This habitual disposition in men is what provides them with the

27 Cajetan Cuddy, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Conscience" in *Christianity and the Laws of Conscience: An Introduction*, ed. Jeffrey B Hammond and Helen M. Alvaré (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 117.

28 ST I, q. 79, a. 13.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Cf. Romano Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 119-120.

32 Cf., Ibid., 129-135.

33 *De veritate*, q. 16, a. 1, c. 3.

universal knowledge of how to act, which only subsequently, through counsel and judgment, becomes narrowed down to the *particular knowledge* needed for the command and execution of a specific action in concrete circumstances. As explained by Cajetan Cuddy,

> … it is a cognitive principle of action because it encompasses those practical principles from which we reason in moral inquiries. As natural and innate, it serves as a 'preamble' to the act of virtue because it objects to evil and inclines the human person to good. [34]

In other words, *synderesis* is crucial for all human acting; if at some fundamental level people were not *naturally* inclined to seek what is good and shun what is evil, no initial movement toward an object would ever take place and human conduct would remain either utterly unexplainable or altogether nonexistent.

What distinguishes the role of *synderesis* from the broader activity of conscience is that *synderesis* is immune from error. Precisely because it is a "natural and innate" disposition, no humans can ever be mistaken about universal principles, as nobody would argue, for example, that desiring evil for oneself is better than desiring good. These principles are evident, and human reason grasps them immediately. This is not the case, however, with the remaining work of conscience. People are often wrong at the level of (3) council and (4) judgment, where *universal knowledge* begins to be applied to a concrete situation. Here, one could say, particularity becomes the key challenge: how do I know whether to loan a large sum of money to someone is a morally right thing to do? She could use the money to invest in her education to get a better job and become financially independent, but she might as well spend it on a luxurious car, which she really does not need. Thus, at this level, conscience is prone to making mistakes either because there is an issue with the knowledge possessed or because one fails at drawing correct conclusions.[35] In any case, for Aquinas, good conscience needs to be properly formed; and even then, it is not enough. Conscience needs prudence so that one can reliably pass from the first four stages to the last two stages of practical reasoning and *actually do what conscience judges to be a morally good act*. The relationship between conscience and prudence has been widely commented on by others; hence, it needs no further discussion at this point.

34 Cuddy, 120.
35 Cf. *De veritate*, q. 16, a. 2., ad. 1.

2.1.1. The limitations of the account of conscience as an act of reason

It should be noticeable that no explicit reference was made to the language of collaboration with God or friendship with God in the above discussion. This does not mean that Aquinas was oblivious to the role of conscience in the unfolding act of creation or that he meant for conscience to be understood solely through the lens of practical reasoning. In fact, one could easily connect the dots in the Thomistic system and develop a persuasive argument in favor of a more personalistic account of Aquinas's understanding of conscience.[36] As the text stands, however, the word conscience does not feature prominently in his major treaties on love or friendship.

The real issue, though, is not the lack of textual evidence but the common interpretation, or better yet, misinterpretation, of conscience as an act of reason. If not explained in a more holistic way, specifically in reference to the personal relationship with God that humanity has been privileged to enjoy, conscience quickly slips into a *subjective judgment*. Again, this cannot be farther from Aquinas' own position, but an undue overemphasis on rationality of conscience can easily become an occasion for justifying an absolute autonomy of reason.

And this seems to be precisely the concern of John Paul II in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. Echoing the preoccupations of Vatican II, the Holy Father warns that:

> … *the autonomy of reason cannot mean* that reason itself *creates values and moral norms*. Were this autonomy to imply a denial of the participation of the practical reason in the wisdom of the divine Creator and Lawgiver or were it to suggest a freedom which creates moral norms, on the basis of historical contingencies or the diversity of societies and cultures, this sort of alleged autonomy would contradict the Church's teaching on the truth about man. It would be the death of true freedom.[37]

Unfortunately, in the world today, human autonomy *is* often conceived as an absolute value. Right and wrong are less and less regarded as objective categories and more as personal preferences rooted in one's personal history. But even more disturbing is the fact that people invoke the *principle of conscience* to justify their departure from God's law. Instead of being the place, where human will eagerly embrace the divine plan and participate in the creative work of God, conscience

36 For example, one could follow the intuition of Cessario, who sees conscience connected to charity through the virtue of prudence. Cf. Cessario, 133.

37 VS, 40.

becomes the place of opposition and the source of radical anthropocentrism. As noted by Joseph Ratzinger, there is a tendency today to "building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."[38]

The reasons for the gradual secularization of conscience are many: rampant materialism, ethical pluralism, technological dominance, educational crisis, etc. Still, one factor merits special emphasis: people have lost the sense of the objective nature of the human person. The very language of "natures" no longer resonates with the modern audience. One might wonder if people today even know what the essence of humanity is. This lack of clear understanding of the nature of the human person as made in the image and likeness of the Creator is precisely what distinguishes Aquinas' idea of conscience from its current counterparts: in the Thomistic account, conscience is placed in the larger metaphysical context, in which everything that exists, including humans, functions according to its proper purpose as intended and designed by God. If this context is missing, however —as it becomes more evident with a widespread secularization— conscience becomes deprived of its fundamental orientation toward the objective truth and instead turns inwards, in search of its own truths and justifications. Unless the link between the Creator and the creature is restored, conscience will always be threatened by the false sense of autonomy and self-actualization.

2.2. Conscience as the voice of God

One could propose that the solution to the problem of an overly rationalized conscience is to re-emphasize its spiritual dimension. Considering that practical reasoning often errs, some consider it a better option to turn directly to God for guidance in the moral decision-making process. Therefore, in addition to the first definition as an act of reason, conscience is frequently described as *the voice of God*.

The tradition of identifying conscience with the voice of God is rich and varied throughout Christian history. Already Augustine thought of conscience as *vox Dei*, and a similar emphasis is discernible in the writings of Thomas More and Joseph Butler.[39] But nowhere is conscience presented with such a level of appreciation

38 Joseph Ratzinger, Homily at "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice Mass." (Vatican, 18 April 2005).

39 Cf. Augustine, *De trinitate*, XIV, 15; Joseph Butler, "Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue," in *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitition and Course of Nature* (London: Knapton, 1736), n.1;

for its theonomous character as in the writings of John Henry Newman, whose entire theology—to echo the words of Pope Benedict XVI—can be described as "one great commentary on the question of conscience."[40]

For Newman, conscience is more than a philosophical concept or an ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Though he certainly builds on the traditional doctrine of conscience as prefigured by Aristotle's *phronesis* and Aquinas's later notion of *consciencia*, Newman's understanding is unique in that it remains essentially *theonomous*.[41] In addition to being a function of practical reasoning, which assists a person in acting morally well, conscience is a place of *an encounter* between God and man, in which the Divine speaks to the human, to the very heart of the person. If it were not so, Newman admits, he himself would have never been converted.[42]

The revelation of God to each man is already inscribed in the work of conscience. For Newman, the peculiar "feeling" or "sensation" of having acted against its voice, or being compelled to pursue its calling, is in itself the proof of the personal love of God, who never ceases to draw man to Himself:

> If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened at transgressing the voice of conscience, *this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible*, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being: we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog … and on the other hand it sheds upon us a deep peace, a sense of security, a resignation, and a hope, which there is no sensible, no earthly object to elicit.

Logan Paul Gage observes that what Newman describes here is more than a mere inference of the Lawgiver from the Law: "rather, he is claiming that if we give a phenomenological analysis of the experience of conscience, we will perceive something exterior to ourselves."[43] It is one thing to know moral law and,

Thomas More, *Prison Letters: 1534–35* in *The Essential Works of Thomas* More, ed. Gerard B. Wegemer, and Stephen W. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1314.

40 Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience: Two Essays* (San Franciso, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 23.

41 There is no question that Newman accepts and builds on the traditional notion of conscience as an act of reason perfected by prudence. Still, his description of the fully formed conscience remains profoundly theological. Cf. Herman Geissler, *Conscience and Truth in the Writings of Blessed John Henry Newman* (Rome: The International Centre of Newman Friends, 2012), 8.

42 "Were it not for this voice, speaking to me so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world." Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 216–7.

43 Logan Paul Gage, "Newman's Argument from Conscience: Why He Needs Paley and Natural Theology after All," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (December 1, 2020), 144.

through it, come to speculate about the qualities of its maker, but it is quite another to know the lawgiver *directly*. For Newman, conscience achieves both, with a much stronger emphasis on the latter:

> You may tell me that this dictate [i.e., of conscience] is a mere law of my nature, as is to joy or to grieve. I cannot understand this. No, *it is the echo of a person speaking to me*. Nothing shall persuade me that it does not ultimately proceed from a person external to me. It carries with it the proof of its divine origin. My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness—just like that I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend. The echo implies a voice, the voice of a speaker. That speaker I love and fear.

The last part is of special significance as it points to the inner relationality implied in the work of conscience. The sense of moral duty manifests the Creator as a *person* who desires more than obedience to the law. At the end of the day, conscience is about establishing a relationship with God, a relationship marked by intimacy and affectivity characteristic of human persons:

> … and more than that—the feeling [of conscience] is one analogous or similar to that which we feel in human matters towards a person whom we have offended; *there is a tenderness almost tearful on going wrong, and a grateful cheerfulness when we go right which is just what we feel in pleasing or displeasing a father or revered superior*. So that contemplating and revolving on this feeling the mind will reasonably conclude that it is an unseen father who is the object of the feeling. And this father has necessarily some of those special attributes which belong to the notion of God. He is invisible—He is the searcher of hearts—He is omniscient as far as man is concerned—He is (to our notions) omnipotent, if He can after so many ages at length hold the judgment, when all sin shall be punished and virtue rewarded.[44]

Precisely because conscience reflects the Person of the Father, His will, and His desires, man cannot ignore its voice. Time and again throughout his works, Newman emphasizes the centrality of conscience to Christian life and the duty to follow it.[45] For the judgment of conscience to truly lead to God in *concrete circumstances of one's life*, however, it must be properly formed. Newman admits

44 Newman, "Proof of Theism," in *The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God According to J. H. Newman*, ed. Adrian J. Boekraad and Henry Tristram (Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1961),117.

45 Consider especially his famous quote addressed 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." John Henry Newman, "A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation" in *Conscience, Consensus, and the Development of Doctrine: Revolutionary texts by John Henry Cardinal Newman* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1992), 457.

that the sense of right and wrong is fundamentally "delicate" and often "obscured" by a variety of factors, including one's passions and education.[46] Therefore, in order to avoid being distorted, it must be formed with the help of Scriptures, Tradition, and Magisterium. But even if distorted, the source of the voice, for Newman, remains the same—it always is, and it continues to be, the loving Father who speaks to the man in the depths of his heart.

2.2.1. The limitations of the account of conscience as God's voice

One of the potential problems with treating conscience as the voice of God is that it encourages *certain kind of passivity on the part of the human person*. To be clear, this is not a sentiment found in Newman's own writings. His account of conscience is much more nuanced than some might assume.[47] Rather, issues emerge whenever one misinterprets his ideas; that is, when one places too much importance on hearing God's voice as something external to the person and inherently difficult to achieve.

If the voice of God is understood exclusively in terms of external intervention by which the Creator dictates what one ought to do or avoid doing, conscience becomes something of a passive ability to receive His word, but not a capacity for good moral acting that involves the entirety of the human person. On this reading, man's response can be easily construed as something reactionary and ultimately impersonal: God demands, man obeys. The dynamic of conscience is thus stripped of any sense of human creativity or enthusiasm and becomes a matter of pure obedience to the commands of God. There is no room to discover, learn, or grow in one's awareness of the moral good, as the totality of moral knowledge is transmitted directly and exclusively by God. In other words, man has nothing to offer—instead of being an active contributor to the grand project of Creation, he limits himself to a mere submission to God's plans, which are seen fundamentally as fixed and at times even encroaching on man's personal freedom.

Sadly, this kind of thinking has not been uncommon among the people of contemporary age. As argued by Fr. Servais Pinckaers, for many today, moral life

46 Ibid., 452.

47 Even though Newman's contribution to the development of the doctrine of conscience lies in defending its fundamentally theological character, the British Cardinal does not ignore its natural proportions. For a detailed analysis of how Newman's treatment of conscience is heavily indebted to Aristotle, see Gerard J. Hughes, "Conscience" in *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 189-220.

has become synonymous with following rules rather than seeking authentic human flourishing. Even among believers, human actions have come the be defined predominantly in terms of obedience to God's law, involving little to no reference to human nature:

> Since morality drew its origin from divine will alone, human actions, considered in isolation as we have seen, would be evaluated morally only and precisely as they related to law. In themselves they could be called indifferent, like the freedom that formed them. They became moral through the intervention of the law: good if they conformed to it, bad if contrary to it. Morality thus studied actions from the outside. As the nominalists were to say, the relationship was accidental.[48]

Again, this is hardly an ideal way of thinking about collaborating with God, who from the beginning clearly desired that men be more than passive protagonists in His ongoing work of creation.[49]

3. RE-IMAGINING CONSCIENCE AS AN ACT OF FRIENDSHIP

In summary, neither the first account of conscience as an act of reason nor the second account of conscience as the voice of God can alone provide an adequate basis for thinking about how God influences the world through human persons. Perhaps this is the reason why the Catechism discusses both definitions under a single section.[50] The above discussion of the limitations of the two accounts points to the need for a more unified understanding of conscience—a more *personal* understanding, which would preclude men from falling into temptations of radical subjectivism on the one hand and passive obedience on the other, and make them more deeply aware of their role in the universe as *co-creators* with God. It will now be argued that such understanding can be achieved if conscience is reimagined as an act of friendship.

48 Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 343-344.

49 One is reminded here of the command to "cultivate the ground," which in itself assumes a certain level of creativity on the part of Adam. Cf. Gen 2:15.

50 See specifically §1778, where conscience is described both as "an act of judgment" and the "aboriginal Vicar of Christ."

3.1. Friendship as union of wills

For any collaboration to be effective, it is critical that the parties involved possess a certain commonality of vision, that is, a clear understanding of what is being pursued and what is required of them to bring the project to completion. In classical philosophy, this commonality is most clearly exhibited among friends, where the actions of one become the actions of another.[51]

Every friendship is structured around the three basic movements. The first step is always *benevolence*, which indicates the simple desire for the good of another. Unlike an enemy, a friend wishes what is best for another and experiences sadness when such good is not realized. The second movement is that of *concord*, which is a natural consequence of benevolence. It consists "in friends willing the same things and rejecting the same things."[52] And finally, there is *beneficence*, which represents the practical application of the previous two movements; true friends not only wish or agree on what is good for another, they do the good for each other's sake. Now, out of the three, the most characteristic of friendship is concord, by which two friends come to act in a unified fashion because of their *relationship with each other*. Anybody can be benevolent to anybody, but only friends pursue the same things and share the same hopes.

Thus, concord is principally about choices.[53] A real friendship is more than a subjective feeling of belonging to someone; it is about things to be done. Friends choose to act in a similar fashion because their choices contribute to the well-being of their relationship. Their acting in harmony forms the basis of their shared life and causes them joy. As a consequence, no friend makes his decisions entirely independently: "the friend chooses so that his choice may stand in a particular relation to his friend's."[54] Obviously, this does not mean that friends need to have the same opinions about everything. In fact, friendships would be extremely boring if they required people to think identically. Instead, Aquinas believes that it is more accurate to think of concord as the "union of wills" rather than the "union of opinions."[55] Commenting on Aristotle's *Ethics*, he writes:

51 "Since a man's friend is another self, so to speak, the friend's actions will be his own in a sense." Cf. Aristotle, *Ethics*, bk. 9, c. 10, n. 1896.

52 Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, c. 12, l. 3, n. 996.

53 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 9, l. 6, n. 1830.7.

54 Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2007), 10.

55 ST II-II, q. 37, a.1.

> ... men are not said to be in concord who agree on any subject whatsoever, like people who hold the same opinion about speculative questions, such as the heavenly bodies. *Common agreement on these truths does not pertain to the concept of friendship, because friendship arises from preference*; but judgment in speculative problems is not derived from compulsory preference. Consequently, nothing prevents some friends from holding different views and others the same view on these questions.[56]

Friends may genuinely disagree on what pertains to speculative knowledge, but not on practical matters that shape their character and can have a significant impact on their friendship. Aquinas, like Aristotle, believes that "bad men cannot agree" and therefore are excluded from real friendships.[57] Schwartz reports that "the sharing of goals," characteristic of true friendships, "is a fragile state of affairs that can be positively or negatively affected by various factors, such as personal dispositions." [58] And since people tend to grow weak in their commitments, it is necessary that those hoping to form genuine friendships cultivate also personal virtues:

> Perhaps central among a number of reasons for this is that base people are unable to sustain concord over time. Their character lacks the stability and firmness necessary to achieve it. This volatility is a result of a disordered soul: the base lack internal concord. Instead, they are the location of internal conflict between opposing forces. Their sensitive and rational appetites push in opposite directions, thus causing the same disharmony in the soul that is present in the incontinent or weak-willed.[59]

To summarize, concord, understood as the union of wills, forms an indispensable part of any genuine friendship. It concerns practical choices aimed at the realization of personal goals shared by virtuous friends. For a friendship to reach its full maturity, however, one additional condition is required: *personal awareness.*

3.2. Friendship as union of persons

It would not be entirely unjustified to interpret the above comments in a utilitarian way. Emphasizing concord as the central category of friendship runs the risk of reducing it to a mere pursuit of common objectives. But while no

56 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 9, l. 6, n. 1831.
57 *Ibid.* n. 1838.
58 Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship,* 10.
59 Ibid. 10.

friendship can exist without concord, concord alone certainly does not exhaust the full meaning of an authentic friendship. Both Aristotle and Aquinas strongly agree on this point.[60] The focus must ultimately be on *persons* who constitute the center of each other's attention and the final goal of friends' activity.

Thomas attends to this perspective when he draws the distinction between the love of concupiscence and the love of friendship:

> As the Philosopher says (*Rhet*. ii, 4), *to love is to wish good to someone*. Hence the movement of love has a twofold tendency: towards the good which a man wishes to someone (to himself or to another) and towards that to which he wishes some good. Accordingly, man has love of concupiscence towards the good that he wishes to another, and love of friendship towards him to whom he wishes good.[61]

The issue is not that love of concupiscence is in itself bad or has no place in genuine friendship—without it, man would not be able to do anything good for the other person. But there is more to friendship than pursuing common objectives; true friends love each other for each other's sake. In other words, *they themselves become the goods of friendship*. As pointed out by Anthony Flood, "in the love of friendship, a person does not merely love the replaceable qualities of the beloved but rather the unique subject who anchors and is expressed through these qualities."[62] For Aquinas, friendship is thus a much deeper reality than concord; at the end of the day, it is about making "one heart of two"[63] and entering into a real union marked by the mutual indwelling of persons.[64]

Furthermore, such a union requires that friends become *aware of their own friendship*. It is not enough that they spend time together or even live together (though these represent natural manifestations of friendship for Aristotle); true

60 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 8, c. 3. n. 1156-1158b.

61 ST I-II, q. 26, a. 2.

62 Anthony T Flood, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Love: Aquinas on Participation, Unity, and Union*. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 7.

63 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, bk. 4, c. 21.

64 "This effect of mutual indwelling may be understood as referring both to the apprehensive and to the appetitive power. Because, as to the apprehensive power, the beloved is said to be in the lover, inasmuch as the beloved abides in the apprehension of the lover, according to Phil. 1:7, For that I have you in my heart: while the lover is said to be in the beloved, according to apprehension, inasmuch as the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul [...] As to the appetitive power, the object loved is said to be in the lover, inasmuch as it is in his affections, by a kind of complacency: causing him either to take pleasure in it, or in its good, when present; or, in the absence of the object loved, by his longing, to tend towards it with the love of concupiscence, or towards the good that he wills to the beloved, with the love of friendship: not indeed from any extrinsic cause (as when we desire one thing on account of another, or wish good to another on account of something else), but because the complacency in the beloved is rooted in the lover's heart. For this reason, we speak of love as being intimate; and of the bowels of charity." ST I-II, q. 28, a. 2.

friends delight in being conscious of each other's existence[65] and know each other's feelings.[66] In friendship, personal presence must be marked by a mutual attention or sensitivity to the presence of another. As explained by Flood,

> Propinquity does not suffice for friendship. *Personal presence minimally involves a mutual awareness of two people as people*. As the tendency of love toward union progresses, it must go deeper into what makes the person a personal being in general and specifically in terms of his beliefs and desires. For Aquinas, real possession does not occur until the lover encounters and enters into the heart of the other; the degree of intimacy is measured in large part by the extent to which the heart of the lovers is mutually known and enjoyed.[67]

Only then, when aware of each other's presence, do friends develop a real union, a genuine bond of affection, which makes them tend toward each other in a similar fashion a stone naturally tends towards the ground because of gravity.[68] They desire the same things and choose the same things no longer because they are good for them individually, but because they foster the union between them.[69]

3.3. Friendship with God

Now, before returning to the question of conscience, it is important to emphasize that friendships are not reserved exclusively for men. Aquinas insists that humans can enter into a genuine friendship also with God, their Creator.[70] In fact, in Jesus even sinners have been found worthy of becoming the friends of God.[71] Therefore, everything that was said about human friendships can be related to the supernatural friendship between God and men, albeit in a qualified way.

First, human beings are able to reach concord with God. Though human nature was seriously wounded by the Original Sin, Aquinas maintains that men are still capable of knowing the Creator's will: "the rational creature is subject to divine providence in such a way that he is not only governed thereby but is also able to

65 Cf. *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 9, l. 4, n.1813.7.
66 Ibid., bk. 8, l. 2, n. 1559.
67 Flood, 9.
68 Cf. Schwartz, 9 & ST I-II, q. 26, a. 1-2.
69 "This union is according to a bond of affection, and is likened to substantial union, inasmuch as the lover stands to the object of his love, as to himself, if it be love of friendship; as to something belonging to himself, if it be love of concupiscence." ST I-II, q. 28, a.1, r. 2.
70 Cf. ST II-II, q. 23.
71 "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." Jn 15:15.

know the rational plan of providence in some way."[72] While it is true that the will of God cannot be fully known to the human beings, Thomas keeps insisting that we can nonetheless conform to it "in proportion to the knowledge which we have."[73] Accordingly, even if in a limited way, by growing in their awareness of God's plan for the world, men can align their activity with the activity of God and thus effectively make the divine goals their own goals, in a spirit of friendly collaboration.

Second, human beings can achieve real union with God. In his Commentary on the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, Aquinas asserts that this union is possible both at the natural and supernatural levels:

> Now we have a twofold union with God: one refers to the goods of nature, which we partake of here from him; the other refers to beatitude, inasmuch as through grace we partake here of heavenly felicity, as far as it is possible here. […] According to the first communication with God there is a natural friendship, according to which each one, inasmuch as he is, seeks and desires as his end God as first cause and supreme being. According to the second communication there is the love of charity, by which only an intellectual creature loves God.[74]

Consequently, though basic union with God might be reached by following the precepts of natural law, grace is necessary for the friendship with God to grow and *reach the level of the authentic union of persons*. As commented by Flood, "on account of the gulf necessitated by God's superiority over human beings, a person cannot establish such a friendship by choice… God, however, can choose to extend himself to the human person."[75] This overcoming of the metaphysical distance between the Creator and the creature is thus something completely gratuitous and yet, at the same time, expected from the true Friend, who provides every means necessary to let Himself be known and loved. Among these, Aquinas singles out the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which "not only is God in us, but also that we are in God."[76]

3.4. Conscience as an act of friendship

If all of this is true, then it seems that placing the discussion of God's influence over the world in the wider context of friendship is not only helpful but necessary.

72 *Summa contra gentiles*, bk. 3, c. 113, p. 5.
73 *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 7. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Schwartz, 42-68.
74 *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, c. 13, l. 4, n. 806.3.
75 Flood, 57.
76 *Summa contra gentiles*, bk. 4, c. 21, p. 4.

God desires not just *any* collaboration with men, but the kind of collaboration that would be fruitful and personal. That is why He communicates with them primarily through the voice of conscience and not just through laws or cosmic events. And yet, even then, it is not guaranteed that men will live up to the dignity of their calling. As was argued before, without adequate attention to the relational dimension of conscience, its voice can easily become misinterpreted as one's own voice or a place of mere obedience. By extending his invitation to become His *friends*, however, God transforms the sense in which humans are called to collaborate with Him. In effect, this means that conscience becomes an act of friendship—not just an act of practical intelligence or religious obedience, *but an act of genuine collaboration between the two friends.*

First, because *conscience fosters the union of wills*. As discussed earlier, it assists man in judging and deciding how to act in a given situation so as to ensure that his actions are in conformity with what is authentically good. However, since the source and origin of all goodness is not some impersonal power but God, who desires a living relationship with men, conscience is really responsible for aligning the two wills. It is what enables a man to wish the same things and hope for the same things his Creator does, and consequently bring about a genuine collaboration between the two. In short, conscience generates concord.

And secondly, *conscience fosters the union of persons*. It is not only a matter of hearing God's voice and becoming perfectly good at executing His commands. Conscience makes one attuned to the presence of another person; the One who is at the same time his Creator and his Friend. In other words, conscience allows for more than a mutual collaboration in caring for creation. It becomes the place of a personal encounter, the place where God and man share in the intimacy of friendship.

CONCLUSION

Any proposition which seeks to improve rather than replace previous ideas is bound to bear some of their imperfections and re-imagining conscience as an act of friendship is no different. As stated at the beginning of this article, the proposed way of thinking of conscience is not meant to represent a break from the Church's consistent teaching on the subject. Hence, one could argue, for example, that the category of friendship is still too exclusive, especially to non-believers or that it does not add anything theologically substantive to the discussion. These concerns are not without merit. As it stands, however, placing conscience in the broader

context of friendship does offer a more interesting approach to the consideration of how God influences the world.

First, because it resists modern tendencies toward secularization and absolutization of human autonomy. Since friends never make decisions independently of each other, conscience can be reconceived as serving the good of friendship rather than one's own purposes. Second, the dynamic of friendship does not allow for treating conscience in a mechanistic way as a place of mere obedience or execution of moral tasks commanded by God. Friendship affords the deepening of moral awareness to include a sense of a more personal collaboration with the Creator, leading ultimately to an intimate union with Him. And lastly, perhaps most importantly, it infuses a person with a sense of greater enthusiasm and desire to keep striving for moral excellence. Just as one remains more motivated when acting out of love for his friends rather than himself, conscience becomes the means of fostering something greater than one's own moral perfection; it becomes the vehicle for the deepening and growing of the most excellent of relationships—the friendship with the Creator.

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