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Book Review: The Eyes and Ears of Conscience: Lessons of Encouragement

Reviewed by Peter Black

Thomas Ryan SM: *The Eyes and Ears of Conscience: Lessons of Encouragement*.
Strathfield NSW: St. Paul's Publications 2020, 242pp.

Countless books have been written on conscience down through the centuries because conscience is at the heart of the moral life and the starting point for Catholic moral theology. So why another publication on conscience? Theology constantly develops for many reasons, including a shift of emphasis, change in the cultural and social environment, new theological insights, or new leadership within the Church. Fr. Tom Ryan SM has tapped into all these developments in his latest publication approaching the topic of conscience with a method, a structure and a stress which prove to be both refreshing and informative.

Allow me to illustrate this firstly with some broad strokes before going into more detail of each of the chapters of the book. Traditionally conscience has been explained with a heavy stress on the philosophical concepts that undergird the concept and experience of the human conscience. The author while not neglecting this approach takes seriously the call of the Second Vatican Council to make the sacred Scripture the soul of moral theology. Beginning with the first chapter of the book, "Conscience as Attention and Recognition" the author explores three biblical stories, namely, the creation account in Genesis, the widow in the temple (Mk12:42-44) and the uninvited woman at the dinner hosted by Simon for Jesus (Lk 7:36-50). Before delving into these scriptural texts the author helps the reader to appreciate the modern tools employed to interpret the sacred texts in a way this is easily understood. The texts selected illustrate what we might call the bright side of conscience, the ability of conscience to recognize and to act for the good. This use of biblical stories and images continues throughout the book, such as the image of the tree and the fruit it produces, the story of Zacchaeus and the Prodigal Son. These powerful images and stories in the early chapters of the work give us an insight into the nature and workings of the human conscience which will be developed in more detail in the second part of the book. For example, the stories of Zacchaeus and the Prodigal Son remind us that our perception of what is truly good and our choice of the good can be in slow increments sometimes. We need to be patient with ourselves and others as we grow in the moral life.

The second broad stroke I will make is in reference to chapter nine in Part Two of the publication, the chapter is entitled "Conscience and the Courtesy of God." Here Fr. Tom Ryan does us a great service as he explains how the Church is always at the service of

conscience. Pope Francis stands within the evolving history of fully understanding the development of the human conscience. His exhortation *The Joy of Love* is a long and complex document dealing with the joys and challenges of the married life. He is not afraid to address those couples whose relationships “show signs of a wounded and troubled life.” There is an acknowledgement that people often grow morally in the midst of many limitations, that their consciences often take small steps in the recognition and the doing of the good. These small steps are pleasing to God because they are trying to give the most generous response they can to God in a difficult situation. Fr. Tom Ryan skillfully demonstrates that Pope Francis comes from a Catholic moral tradition of patience and mercy. This moral approach is exemplified in St. Alphonsus Liguori, Doctor of the Church and Patron of Moral Theology and in Fr. Jean-Claude Colin founder of the Society of Mary. The conclusion made is that God will gradually bring people of good will, despite their limitations, to what is true and good and that the Church should be encouraging in its patient approach in the service of conscience.

So much for some broad strokes. No doubt the reader would like some more detailed information concerning the structure and content of the book. The book consists of Two Parts entitled “Served by the Past” and “Served by the Present.” Each part has five chapters.

Part One considers conscience as attention and recognition, conscience and the conflict with sin, failure and hope, the centrality of hospitality and mercy in the developed conscience, Jesus at the heart of the human conscience and finally the journey the conscience takes to forgiveness.

Part Two continues to dwell on conscience and how it is directed to the service of God and others but this time through the witness of some very powerful non-biblical stories. These stories make the point that we are fundamentally drawn to the beauty we see in heroic lives. The good and the beautiful in these characters speak to our conscience, moral beauty has a capacity to arouse moral emotion in us so that we want to follow their example. The chapters of Part Two include the themes of conscience and self-transcendence, the Spirit at work, conscience and redeeming grace, partners and friends with God and as already previously mentioned conscience and the courtesy of God. Of course, a book review of this size and nature cannot take up each chapter in detail. However, I would like to take up one theme in one of these chapters to illustrate how the development of the human conscience can be deeply influenced by the society within which it lives.

In chapter eight, “Thinking About Sin” the author considers institutional injustices and cultures where attitudes have been deformed or distorted, values lost or obscured. The specific issue taken up is racism. The question is asked: how can a conscience develop when the social context, the culture, over an extended period of time, has produced an insensitivity and callousness toward those of darker skin? The author draws on the context and experience of the North American theologian, Bryan Massingale, to explore

how a conscience needs to free itself sometimes from a blindness that can be culturally induced.

Throughout the book Fr. Tom Ryan is careful to be faithful to the truth that our God given conscience, which calls us to what is good, reflects the image of God in which we are made. Such a conscience involves all the dimensions of being human, namely, thinking, feeling, desiring, imagining, intuiting, remembering, judging and finally choosing and acting. In other words, the author's treatment of conscience is comprehensive, not restrictive. His broad knowledge of literature in general and theological literature in particular, allows him to present a consideration of conscience that speaks to the contemporary Christian. The book is not written only for professionals but "importantly, for the general reader and those who want to nourish their faith." Even the structure of each chapter makes it accessible to all and suitable for group discussions. At the end of each chapter there is a summary of the key points made and after each summary there is a list of questions. I highly recommend this new publication and only regret that I cannot give a detailed account of each chapter. For example, the treatment of the erroneous conscience, which includes a consideration of where such a conscience stands in terms of responsibility is concise and easy to comprehend. Of course, a book review is supposed to give the reader a taste rather than a full meal and indicate if the meal is worth consuming. This book on conscience offers a rich and satisfying repast with all the essential vitamins and minerals. The gift of conscience involves an interplay between light and dark and at times a struggle between grace and sin but it is always at the centre of being a person made in the image of God called to be responsible.