

Missiological Implications of Conscience in Present-Day Roman Catholicism

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Abstract

During Jorge Mario Bergoglio's papacy, the theology of conscience has taken on a significant role. A developed theology of conscience emerged during the Second Vatican Council, most notably with *Gaudium et spes*, and later developed as essential in moral theology. Francis is the first pope to fully embody Vatican II teachings, in particular in his incorporation of the conscience into theology and practice. During the first months of his papacy, he made it clear that conscience is crucial to his theology and, in a letter exchange with a prominent Italian journalist, he underscored obedience to one's conscience as the key to receiving forgiveness of sins. This development has tremendous theological and missiological implications for the Roman Catholic Church.

Keywords

Roman Catholicism, Pope Francis, conscience, missiology, morality, Vatican II, Gaudium et spes

Introduction

In September of 2013, the Argentine Jorge Bergoglio had been Pope Francis for only a few months. The world, and especially the Catholic faithful, still had much to learn about the new pope. His theology and policies, and the convictions that would shape his papacy were still unknown. An essential piece of this puzzle, however, was divulged to the famed Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari in September of 2013. In an exchange of letters between Scalfari and the Vatican State, Pope Francis disclosed a crucial piece of his theological convictions. In his letter to Scalfari, the pope addresses the position of the Catholic Church regarding those who do not believe in Jesus Christ. More specifically, Francis responds to Scalfari's inquiry about whether God ultimately forgives those who do not believe. After stating that God's mercy knows no bounds and no limits, the pope wrote this telling statement: "The issue for those who do not believe in God concerns obedience to their conscience. Sin, even for those who do not believe, occurs when one goes against their conscience."¹ The pope's statement here is significant and has tremendous theological and missiological implications for the Roman Catholic Church. This article aims to assess those implications from an Evangelical reading and perspective.

I. *Defining Conscience*

Concerning the weight of Pope Francis's statement and the importance the conscience receives in the salvation of the soul, our first task must be an attempt—feeble as it may be—to define the conscience. This task would be simplified were the Bible to provide a clear definition of the term. This is not the case, however, so we are left to piece together what Scripture does reveal concerning the conscience while also exploring other sources that aid us in better understanding and defining the conscience. Certainly, our research will take us outside of Scripture, but in doing so, we want to be vigilant in not overstepping the boundaries the Bible provides and stipulates concerning the idea and concept of conscience. Our reflections must add to and complement what God has revealed through his Word, not take away or detract from it. It is important to ground the conscience in the Word of God from the outset, as doing so necessarily makes the discussion of the conscience a moral one. Giuseppe Angelini explains why this distinction is

¹ "Papa Francesco scrive a Repubblica: 'Dialogo aperto con i non credenti,'" *La Repubblica*, http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2013/09/11/news/sintesi_lettera_bergoglio-66283390/?refresh_ce.

important when he says, “The term ‘conscience,’ in modern-day use, does not refer to moral conscience, but an awareness of self.”²

Etymologically speaking, however, the term “conscience” derives from the Greek *syndērēsis* and *syneidēsis* and in both cases affirms the moral nature of its meaning. *Syndērēsis* underscores the habit or capacity of the conscience and the basic sense of responsibility that characterizes humanity. It is a term, however, that is not frequently found in Greek literature and is largely accredited to Jerome. *Syneidēsis* is understood as the action of the conscience, determining whether an act is right or wrong. This usage is common in Paul’s writings. In any case, they both relate to the moral nature of the conscience.

Timothy O’Connell further affirms the moral nature of conscience when he says, “conscience is often taken to be a synonym for morality itself.”³ Indeed, the conscience makes itself known when we are faced with questions of morality. What is right or wrong? What should I do? These are the questions through which the conscience reveals itself to us, for they are deeply moral. Conscience is not a mere awareness of self. Internal conflict makes it present and reminds us of its reality. It is virtually impossible to suppress. Attempts at suppressing the conscience and the moral battles that rage in our minds are almost always futile. We can certainly choose to ignore the conscience, but we simply cannot make it go away.

This development suggests that to be human is to have a conscience. It is an integral part of who we are and how God has made us, and this should not surprise us. Scripture is clear that we are all made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), and God is a moral being who decides what is right and what is wrong. Those created in his image, therefore, are also moral beings, as they bear the image of their Creator. The conscience, then, is inherent to personhood and is not the result of sin. Indeed, it is greatly impacted by sin (a topic to which we will return later), but it is not a product of sin. It is a creation of the God of the Bible and is, therefore, an inherent and integral characteristic of being human. The Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck eloquently summarizes and describes this phenomenon of the conscience.

Etymologies can assist us in defining the notion of the conscience. Included in the key terms are ideas of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-testimony about my conduct. Using our reason, we form judgments about our own conduct on the basis of God’s law, which lies in our heart. This law of the conscience is called the

² Giuseppe Angelini, *La Coscienza Morale: Dalla voce alla parola* (Milan: Edizioni Glossa srl, 2019), 13.

³ Timothy E. O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 103.

syndērēsis. It comes from God, to whom alone it is subject. To the degree that it is common to all people, it contains natural principles of religion, morality, and justice and is called a “natural conscience.” For those regenerated by the Holy Spirit, enlightened consciences are those bound to the Word of God. No person or human authority may bind the conscience; only he who created and knows the conscience can bind and punish it.⁴

The idea of the moral nature of the conscience is well supported by Scripture. Although the concept is not prevalent, and there is no word that corresponds with the conscience in the Old Testament, the idea is undoubtedly present. Here it is the “heart” that provides moral guidance. “In the Old Testament the heart is present as the witness of the moral value of human acts.”⁵ Clear testimony of the conscience is present with the remorse of Joseph’s brothers (Gen 37), in David after the census (2 Sam 24:10), in Solomon’s dedicatory temple prayer (1 Kgs 8), and with Jeremiah’s declaration that sin is written on the tablet of the heart (Jer 17:1). This survey is not exhaustive, but it demonstrates the presence of the idea of conscience in the Old Testament.

The idea of conscience is more prevalent in the New Testament. Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley helpfully point out that the Greek equivalent for conscience occurs twice in Acts, twenty times in Paul’s letters, five times in Hebrews, and three times in 1 Peter.⁶ Studying these texts and the usages of the word in the New Testament, Naselli and Crowley note that the conscience appears to be capable of performing three critical actions: (1) it can bear witness or confirm (Rom 2:15; 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 5:11); (2) it can judge or try to determine another person’s freedom (1 Cor 10:29); (3) it can lead one to act a certain way. Three examples illustrate this action: it can lead one to either accuse or defend oneself based on how the conscience bears witness (Rom 2:15); it can lead one to submit to authorities (Rom 13:5); it helps in determining what food can be eaten from that which should not be (1 Cor 10:25, 27–28).⁷

Reflections on the conscience of this nature would lead one to believe that an attempt at defining conscience would produce only long and convoluted definitions that create more confusion than clarity. One would be wrong,

⁴ Herman Bavinck. *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 166.

⁵ Marciano Vidal, ed., *Manuale di etica teologica*, trans. Lorenzo de Lorenzi (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1994), 529.

⁶ Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train it, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

however, in making this assumption. The Greek lexicon, for example, defines the conscience simply as “the inward faculty that distinguishes right and wrong.”⁸ Similarly, but with some noteworthy differences, Naselli and Crowley suggest, “The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”⁹ This definition personalizes the conscience, underscoring the idea that what one believes is right and wrong is not necessarily the same as what is right and wrong. It also suggests that the conscience can change for both good and bad. The renowned Catholic moral theologian Bernard Haring defines the conscience as a “person’s moral faculty, the inner core and sanctuary where one knows oneself in confrontation with God and with fellow men.”¹⁰ Lastly, J. I. Packer reminds us of Thomas Aquinas’s classic definition of the conscience as “man’s mind making moral judgements.”¹¹

To summarize, the conscience is the moral command center of our being. It guides and directs as we seek to determine what is right and wrong, what is good and evil, what we should do and should not do. It is the “voice within actually addressing us to command or forbid, approve or disapprove, justify or condemn.”¹² It predates sin and was part of creation, which God declared was good (Gen 1:31). It remained intact after sin entered into history, but together with the rest of creation, it was greatly damaged by sin. The degree to which it was damaged is a crucial part of this reflection and will receive more attention shortly.

II. *A Brief Historical Survey of the Conscience*

While our focus is on the conscience in present-day Roman Catholic theology and practice, a brief historical survey of the conscience is necessary to provide a framework for the current discussion. This brief survey begins with the church fathers and will bring us to the present day, reaching the crux of the conversation.

Concerning the church fathers and the conscience, Bavinck provides a helpful and succinct analysis. He states, “The church fathers provide very

⁸ Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 967.

⁹ Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 42.

¹⁰ Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, vol. 1, *General Moral Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 224.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *Serving the People of God: Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 2:334.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:335.

little about the conscience.”¹³ Of course, “very little” does not mean that the conscience is absent in the church fathers. References do appear here and there. Clement of Alexandria wrote that a good conscience keeps the soul pure and preserves it from ignorance,¹⁴ affirming the moral nature of the conscience.

John Chrysostom spoke even more of the conscience. In a sermon on Genesis 27:42, he writes, “So let no one claim to be neglecting virtue through ignorance or through not having the way to it pointed out. In fact, we have an adequate instructor in our consciences, and it is not possible for anyone to be deprived of help from that source.”¹⁵ In a sermon on Matthew 15, Chrysostom explains that there is nothing more pleasurable than a sound conscience.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is nothing as painful and that cuts so deep as a bad conscience.¹⁷ For Chrysostom, the conscience is an uncorrupted judge and, therefore, unerring in its judgment. It is divine and therefore cannot be bribed. It is implanted in our souls by God himself. Additionally, Chrysostom believed that conscience is an autonomous and autarchic source of moral insight, along with creation as the other source of our knowledge of God.¹⁸

The scholastic theologians made a much closer examination of conscience. Here we see for the first time the integration of the theological dimension of the conscience with its anthropological dimension. The scholastics discussed the term *syndērēsis* widely, although in his exposition of Ezekiel, the church father Jerome introduced the term *syndērēsis* as the conscience itself, which rationally perceives the sin in our hearts. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas raises the question of whether *syndērēsis* is a special power of the soul distinct from others. In his response, he argues that it is not a power but a habit¹⁹ and thus is malleable and can be trained in the same way that humankind is born with the idea of what is true and false and so can determine good from evil.

Returning to the idea of *syndērēsis* as a habit, as suggested by Aquinas, *syndērēsis* always incites one toward good while opposing evil. Bavinck clarifies when he says,

¹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 176.

¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.14 (ANF 2:506).

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 54 (The Fathers of the Church 87:92 [trans. Robert C. Hill]; PG 54:472).

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, NPNF¹ 10:331 (*Homily* 53, on Matt 15:32).

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, NPNF¹ 11:424 (*Homily* 12; Rom 6:19).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11:467–68 (*Homily* 16, on Rom 9:20–21).

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 79, art. 12.

Scholastic theologians held firmly to this notion of *syndērēsis*, maintaining within it the human moral nature in the state of sin, and viewing it as the capacity to do good, in the same way that reason is the capacity to know the truth. Nevertheless, they did not for that reason deny the depth of sin, because this *syndērēsis* is inclined to the good in general, but it neither discloses the genuinely good (which is meritorious) nor leads one to perform it fully.”²⁰

The scholastic development of the conscience—and especially the contribution of Aquinas—is significant to the conversation at hand and has greatly influenced present-day Catholic theology of the conscience.

Looking ahead to the Reformed tradition, Bavinck helpfully notes that “the Protestant Reformation was an act of conscience, and in this way conscience is frequently discussed by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.”²¹ In John Calvin, we note the influence of Chrysostom’s writing in the use of conscience in the sense that it does not allow man to hide his sin from God. Conscience provides an “awareness which hales man before God’s judgment” and “is a sort of guardian appointed for man to note and spy out all his secrets that nothing may remain buried in darkness.”²² The conscience cannot be bribed to betray the role it was created to serve. Unlike Chrysostom, however, Calvin would not consider the conscience to be uncorrupt and thus unerring. The Reformers, such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, believed that the conscience, due to sin, is inadequate and is dependent on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit for enlightenment and guidance. Only God himself and his Word can fully bind the conscience (Isa 33:22; Jas 4:12).

Contemporary thinkers, in line with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, have detached the conscience from God, his law, and his Word and placed it on its own. With this detachment, the conscience became purely moral and subjective. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, to use Enlightenment examples, conscience is indeed detached from God entirely and simply a moral instrument, not a religious one. “Kant wants nothing to do with an erring conscience; the very notion must be banned.”²³ The German philosopher Johann Fichte also rejected the notion that the conscience errs and even elevated it to a higher level than Kant did. For Fichte, the conscience was an enlightening, infallible, and undeceived celestial gift.

Even more recently, especially with the theories of Sigmund Freud and his idea of the super-ego (which he equates with the conscience), we see a

²⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 848 (3.19.15).

²³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 189.

bizarre and further distancing of the conscience from God and his Word. Packer provides a helpful synthesis of Freud's hypotheses that demonstrate the point at hand.

Freud gives the name of conscience to the various neurotic and psychotic phenomena of obsessive restriction, compulsion and guilt His model of man, hypothesized on the basis of clinical work with the mentally ill in fin-de-siècle Vienna, pictures the psyche as like a troubled home, where the ego on the ground floor (that is, the self-conscious self, with doors and windows open to the world) comes under pressure both from the id (aggressive energy rushing up from the cellars of the unconscious) and from the super-ego (an unnerving voice of command from upstairs, whereby repressed prohibitions and menaces from parents and society are "introjected" into conscious life in portentous disguise, and with disruptive effect). The super-ego, each person's tyrannical psychic policeman, is the culprit to which neuroses and psychoses are due, and the goal of psychoanalysis is to strengthen one's ego to unmask the super-ego and see it for the hotch-potch of forgotten traumas which it really is, thus winning freedom to discount it.²⁴

This short historical synthesis of views of the conscience provides the necessary context for the development and articulation of the view of the conscience in present-day Roman Catholic theology and practice, which developed not in a vacuum but is intimately tied to and dependent on the past. With a historical and contextual foundation laid, we are now able to understand better why this is the case.

III. Conscience in Present-Day Roman Catholic Theology and Practice

Any contemporary discussion of the conscience in Roman Catholicism must be pursued in light of Vatican II, for it is Vatican II that more than anything else has shaped the modern-day Catholic, the Catholic Church, and its theological interpretation of the world in which we live. In the documents produced by the Council, conscience receives notable attention, which has been instrumental in shaping present-day Roman Catholic moral theology. What is right, and what is wrong? What is good, and what is evil? These questions, as we have discussed, are found at the core of morality, and it is the conscience that plays the decisive role in responding to these inquiries.

Most contemporary discussion on the conscience in Roman Catholicism rely heavily on the Vatican II document *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (better known as *Gaudium et spes*). Here Pope

²⁴ Packer, *Serving the People of God*, 2:337–38.

Paul VI, toward the conclusion of Vatican II, underscores the prominence of the conscience:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon 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.²⁵

According to *Gaudium et spes*, humans are endowed with an innate ability and drive to seek and do good. This ability is an acquired skill that requires constant training. Human beings must learn to distinguish good from bad, and the truly good from what appears to be good. A sensitivity to human values must also grow and develop. From where do people derive this training and sensitivity? Catholic author on the conscience Anthony Marinelli answers this question: “They gain this from the world, culture, family, church, society and ideas that they are exposed to.”²⁶ We should not confuse this type of informed conscience with the conscience endowed on all of humanity for merely being human. The universally endowed conscience is not something we ask for but is simply there. We are born with it. O’Connell refers to this as *conscience/1*.²⁷ Innate to this form of conscience is a general sense of value and an awareness of personal responsibility. It is an innate drive toward what is good and is emblematic of humanity.

The informed conscience that is trained and desires to grow and mature and better decipher what is really true from that which seems true is *conscience/2*. This conscience requires training and education, the sources of which have already been mentioned. “It is on this level that we can distinguish different ‘types’ of conscience, one of which is a Catholic Christian conscience.”²⁸ Conscience/2 is informed by the factors and sources that shape it. For the Catholic, the magisterium, the pope and the bishops, and the local community of faith are the primary educators. While they are primary, there are other sources as well. “In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems that arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships.”²⁹

²⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, 16, December 7, 1965, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

²⁶ Anthony Marinelli, *Conscience and Catholic Faith: Love and Fidelity* (New York: Paulist, 1991), Loc 74 of 1195.

²⁷ See O’Connell’s *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 110–17.

²⁸ Marinelli, *Conscience and the Catholic Faith*, Loc 87 of 1195.

²⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 16.

There remains a third form of conscience. While conscience/1 represents a characteristic and conscience/2 is a process, *conscience*/3 is an event and as such is concrete. With this event, a person makes a concrete judgment concerning an immediate action. Conscience/3 represents the most powerful quality of the conscience. It constitutes the final norm by which a person's action must be guided. "Indeed, by the personal decision either to accept or to refuse the demand of conscience/3, the moral agent engages either in an act of sanctity or in actual sin."³⁰

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, conscience also plays a vital role in understanding contrition and being remorseful and sorrowful regarding sin. It is the stirring of the conscience that initiates the process of contrition, which is then brought to completion in the sacrament of penance. Furthermore, an examination of the conscience prepares one for the reception of this sacrament. This examination is to be carried out in light of the Word of God.³¹ Echoing *Gaudium et spes*, the *Catechism* teaches,

Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.³²

The conscience in modern-day Roman Catholicism also has clear soteriological implications that strongly impact its missiology. In the controversial sixteenth section of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (or *Lumen Gentium*), for example, there is a discussion regarding salvation for those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Jesus Christ, nor his church, yet strive to do good and in some mysterious way seek God. How do they relate to the church, and how does the church view and understand them in their faith journey? The answer is clear. For those who "strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of their conscience,"³³ everlasting salvation can be attained.

Writing in the early years post Vatican II, the noted Catholic moral theologian Haring affirmed the writings of the Council, particularly those of *Lumen Gentium*. Concerning the conscience, he writes,

³⁰ O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 112.

³¹ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, 1453–54, Vatican Archives, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4D.HTM.

³² CCC, 1777 http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5Z.HTM.

³³ *Lumen Gentium*, 16, November 21, 1964, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

When a person is truly looking for what is good and right, there is a kind of inflexibility in the conscience. With unwavering certainty, it orders the will to conform with the intellect, following its light, as the two are rooted together at the core of one's being.³⁴

Sin, therefore, is when the clear dictates of the conscience that lead one to do good and, eventually, eternal salvation are ignored and disobeyed. "Sin is alienation from one's better self, loss of knowledge of the unique name by which we are called, a plunging into the darkness, and a split in the depth of our existence."³⁵

Though this survey of the conscience in modern-day Roman Catholicism is insufficient and incomplete, it suffices to demonstrate the vital role the conscience plays in present-day Roman Catholicism and its crucial theological and missiological implications.

IV. An Evangelical Assessment

This brief Evangelical assessment of the conscience in Roman Catholic theology and practice reveals two concerns: the question of the distinction between an unregenerate and a regenerate conscience and the distinction between a theology of nature and a theology of grace.

1. Unregenerate and Regenerate Conscience

Regarding the first concern, the Evangelical is alarmed by the absence of a distinction between a regenerate and an unregenerate conscience in Roman Catholicism. The difference in views is undoubtedly due to the differences in theological convictions regarding justification. For the Evangelical, justification is a single act with clear juridical implications. For the Catholic, however, justification is not a single act, but a lifelong process. In Roman Catholicism, therefore, there is no regenerate or unregenerate conscience but a "developing conscience."³⁶ Roman Catholic theology trusts the capability of the "developing" conscience to lead one to salvation, as demonstrated by *Lumen Gentium* 16 and the comments of Pope Francis to Scalfari.

Evangelical theology does not reject the ability of the conscience to determine in many situations what is right and what is wrong, but it does reject the capacity of the unregenerate conscience to lead one to repentance and salvation. In 1 Corinthians, Paul makes this point clear when he says, "The

³⁴ Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 1:240.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:260.

³⁶ See CCC, 1784, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P60.HTM.

natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14 *ESV*). Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til articulates this point well when he makes a distinction between the Adamic consciousness and the sinful or unregenerate consciousness. The Adamic consciousness represents human reason as it existed before the fall. “Its knowledge was, in the nature of the case, true, though not exhaustive. This reason was in covenant with God, instead of at enmity against God. It recognized the fact that its function was that of the interpretation of God’s revelation.”³⁷

The Adamic conscience stands in stark contrast with the unregenerate, or sinful conscience, which is

the “natural man,” “dead in trespasses and sin.” The natural man wants to be something that he cannot be. He wants to be “as God” himself the judge of good and evil, himself the standard of truth. He sets himself as the ideal of comprehensive knowledge.³⁸

This person, however, as Paul clearly noted, cannot accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him. It is obvious, therefore, that such a conscience is not naturally capable of guiding one to repentance and salvation. Roman Catholicism, therefore, grants too much to conscience by not making a distinction between a regenerate and unregenerate, or an Adamic and sinful, conscience. Its theology does not allow for this clear distinction either.

2. Theology of Nature and Grace

The second concern is closely related to the first and regards a theology of nature and grace. Reformed Italian scholar Leonardo De Chirico correctly states, “Nature and grace are two fundamental categories in all theological discourse. ... They are always at the center of any theological attempt to come to terms with the Christian faith.”³⁹ This centrality is also relevant when discussing the conscience. It is profoundly shaped by how one understands the theological relationship between nature and grace. This relationship is at the core of any religious system and has systemic implications.

³⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (1974; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 62–63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁹ Leonardo De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism* (New York: Lang, 2003), 195.

In the Roman Catholic religious system, two principal traditions expound this relationship: the Augustinian tradition and the Thomistic tradition. These traditions, as De Chirico notes, “bear witness to a persistent diversity in terms of theological accents and attitudes.”⁴⁰ Whereas the Augustinian tradition stresses the concept of *natura vitata* (or, a corrupted nature), the Thomistic tradition insists on the inner resources of nature’s *capacitas Dei* (or, human capacity for God). While the Roman Catholic system embraces both traditions and does not identify exclusively with either, the Thomistic tradition with its emphasis on nature’s capacity for God has proved more prominent and preferable in Vatican II theology and modern-day Roman Catholicism, as evidenced by the church’s teachings on and interpretation of the conscience.

The implications of the Thomistic tradition are troubling to an Evangelical interpretation of the conscience in Roman Catholic theology and practice. Indeed, Evangelicals reject any notion that nature has any capacity for God. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden of Eden and sin and its devastating effects entered into the world, nature lost all capacity to repair that relationship with God. This is why Paul can say to the Corinthians that the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; rather, they are mere folly to him (1 Cor 2:14). The restoration of that relationship is, therefore, made possible by God’s grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. There is no room at all for *capacitas Dei*. Once we allow for human or nature’s capacity for God, salvation is no longer by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone but now includes roles for humans and nature in salvation. By extension, therefore, the conscience can guide one along the path of salvation, obedience to one’s conscience is key to having success on the salvific journey, and disobedience to conscience, as Pope Francis has noted, is equivalent to sin.

Scripture, however, does not permit such an interpretation of the conscience and the capacity of nature for God. In addition to his teachings to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the church in Ephesus,

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph 2:1–4 esv)

⁴⁰ Ibid., 202.

Paul consistently eliminates the possibility of what Van Til refers to as “a common consciousness.”⁴¹ It is theologically dangerous to speak of such. Scripture consistently contrasts a regenerate conscience with a sinful or depraved conscience. If we were once dead in our sins and are by nature children of wrath, carrying out only the desires of the body and mind, then our conscience cannot be trusted to lead us to repentance and salvation or any right place or standing with God. Nor is it capable of doing so.

The Evangelical must, therefore, raise concerns regarding the present-day understanding of the conscience in Roman Catholic theology and practice, for the clear teachings of Scripture cannot sustain it. It must also be questioned for the strong missiological implications that it has on the Roman Catholic Church and its faithful. We now turn our attention to those implications.

V. Missiological Implications of the Conscience in Roman Catholic Theology and Practice

The Evangelical will note that the missiological implications of the conscience that we have observed here are significant for the Roman Catholic Church. The strong influence of the Thomistic tradition on its view of nature and grace, along with the lack of distinction between the Adamic and unregenerate conscience, is proving to have devastating effects on the missiology of Roman Catholicism. *Lumen Gentium* 16 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church provides a clear example of these devastating effects. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the plan of salvation is vast in its inclusiveness and hinges on a mere acknowledgment of the Creator. “In the first place among these (who acknowledge the Creator) there are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God.”⁴² The extent of salvation is much broader than even this, however: “Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.”⁴³ It is the dictates of the conscience of one moved by grace and striving to do good that serves as the guide to salvation.

With no distinction between the Adamic and the unregenerate conscience, and with the strong influence of the Thomistic *capacitas Dei*, the conscience

⁴¹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 62.

⁴² *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

⁴³ Ibid.

has been given a capacity that Scripture does not warrant, and the result is a confused soteriology. In light of *Lumen Gentium* 16, it is fair to ask who is not included in the church's plan of salvation. Who is not a recipient of God's grace to at least some measure? The renowned Catholic scholar Avery Dulles notes this clearly in his renowned book *Models of the Church*: "The Church ... takes it for granted that others besides Christians are recipients of God's grace in Christ."⁴⁴ The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner took this idea a step further when he proposed the idea of the anonymous Christian. "In the acceptance of himself," Rahner writes, "man is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection and guarantee of his own anonymous movement towards God by grace."⁴⁵ It is the dictates of the conscience that guide one along this anonymous movement toward God and his grace. This explains why Pope Francis can simply refer to obedience to one's conscience as the key to knowing God and disobedience to conscience as equal to sin.

Ignored entirely in this stream of thought and theology, however, is the justice and judgment of God. Even more absent is the idea of hell and eternal punishment. Jesuit theologian John Sachs adds to this observation when he says,

It may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.⁴⁶

A weak and confused soteriology will always produce a weak and confused missiology. If when sincerely desiring to do good and avoid evil one follows the dictates of her or his conscience, which then inevitably, even anonymously, leads to knowledge of the Creator and everlasting salvation, what role then does mission play in the church? What gospel or good news is left for the church to proclaim? What does the mission of the church become? When the plan of eternal salvation is reduced to a genuine attempt to follow the dictates of one's conscience, the message of the gospel and salvation in the cross of Christ become secondary at best and fade into a milieu of contradictory messages, in which even Moslems are considered brothers of the church.

⁴⁴ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1987), 71.

⁴⁵ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 394.

⁴⁶ John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 252–53.

The Evangelical is concerned about this missiology. The Bible is clear: apart from Christ, we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Dead in sin, our natural self cannot perceive the things of the Spirit and even rejects them and considers them folly, preferring instead to live out the passions of the flesh and the desires of the body and mind, which due to our sinful nature are prone to sin and destruction. The natural man desires to be God himself, deciding what is good and what is evil. Sin, however, makes this entirely impossible.

The good news of the Bible is that through God's grace alone, demonstrated in Christ's salvific work on the cross, and through faith alone in the saving work of Christ, humans can be saved from their sins and freed from their bondage to sin. They are made alive in and through Christ and are no longer a slave to sin and the natural, sinful self. The mission of the church is to proclaim this good news with the hope of seeing the lost come to know Christ as Savior. It has, therefore, a clear mission.

Regarding the conscience in Evangelical theology, "awareness of conscience increases church unity and strengthens evangelism and missions."⁴⁷ This is due to the clear distinction between the unregenerate and regenerate conscience and to the rejection of a "common conscience." The unregenerate conscience will naturally reject the things of the Spirit. The regenerate conscience, however, will desire to grow in the knowledge of God's Word, and God's Word will shape and train the conscience to desire church unity, proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and strive towards a unified and common mission with the people of God, the church.

This element is missing in present-day Roman Catholic theology and practice and thus has significant theological and missiological implications. The Evangelical, therefore, is driven to pray for a biblical, gospel reformation in the Roman Catholic Church. The debate regarding the conscience provides a helpful platform on which this discussion may continue.

⁴⁷ Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 17.