

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT FOUR SESSION FOUR: Appraisal



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For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your property, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul (and) daily to discourse about virtue and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living.¹



Life is not so much beginnings and endings as it is middles, middles that don't measure up – and our happiness depends on how we come to terms with the pale reflections of our dreams.²



So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.³



Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and woodworm destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor woodworm destroys them and thieves cannot break in and steal. For wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too.⁴



¹ Plato, “Apology” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, The Jowett Translations, ed Justin D Kaplan, Pocket Books, 1951, 24 and 34. Plato is here speaking on behalf of his teacher, the great Socrates, who actually did not write any books or treatises. There were three thinkers in ancient Greece who stood out above all the others: Socrates (470-399 BCE), Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Between them, they laid the philosophical foundations for the development of Western civilization.

² Paul D Zimmerman, “Middles and Muddles” review of film *Sunday Bloody Sunday* in *Newsweek*, September 27, 1971, 106.

³ Psalm 90:12.

⁴ Matthew 6:19-21. See also Luke 12:33-34.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** All human beings naturally have at least a rudimentary ability and inclination to appraise themselves and their world and their involvement in that world.***

**** Some form of effective appraisal is necessary if human life formation is to be consonant – ie congenial to one’s unique and communal existence, compatible with the unique and communal existence of others, compassionate in its embrace of life in all its limits and brokenness.***

**** Effective appraisal involves the whole of us.***



Human dilemmas

Our focus here is not the functional decisions of life, such as whether or not we are able to do this or that. For example, we might very much wish to do something but be prevented because we do not have the money or the skill or the energy or the time. For example, I might wish to be a medical doctor but do not have the intellectual capacity to cope with the studies or I might wish to live a simple rustic life but I have a spouse and young children for whom that would be disastrous or I might wish to learn carpentry as a hobby but have neither the time, the talent nor the place at home to pursue this hobby. And so on.

In a very real sense, the facts make these sorts of decisions for us, we recognise this and we submit. This is all part of the obedience pattern and the detachment pattern we have already spoken of above. And if we do have the necessary money and/or talent and/or time to do this or that, the decision – in so far as it is about something functional – is one that can be made by simply surveying the facts and assessing what is involved.

These practical, functional decisions are not our concern here. Nor is our concern that of

- the person who is chronically unable to make up his or her mind or
- the scrupulous person who keeps wondering whether he or she has done the wrong thing or
- the obsessive person who is haunted by doubts as to whether they have turned the gas off or locked the front door.

Any of the above might leave a person in a dilemma and, indeed, might create a dilemma for others. But that is not the sort of dilemma we are concerned with here.

We are concerned with a more normal type of dilemma that, from time to time, confronts any thoughtful adult, especially the adult of some depth of

emotional sensitivity and conscience. In sum, **our concern here is how we best engage in the search for the good and the true, the beautiful and the one in our lives.** We assume that this search is central to human fulfilment.

This search and its outcomes affect us in the depths of our very existence. This search is primarily about *being* before it is about doing or having. The search concerns our ability to make decisions that are more or less good, life-giving and truthful, contributing to the moral beauty and unity of our lives together, in harmony with who and what we are.

We are concerned with those instances in life where we must recognise that the path ahead passes through a particular issue, and it is more or less important that we make a good decision or at least make the decision well.

Let us suppose, for the sake of the discussion, that we are talking of a more or less serious situation here.⁵ Life may, for example, demand a decision from us concerning:

- Whether we forgo certain career ambitions in order to give ourselves more generously to our family life or to matters of social concern;
- Whether we turn off a life-support system of a sick child;
- Whether we make a life commitment, in marriage or religious life or some other way;
- Whether we continue to work for a company, where we have a secure job, but we know their business practices are not always ethical;
- Whether we allow our money to be invested in companies and projects of doubtful ethical quality;
- Whether we continue to be active in a parish where we experience little or no life;
- Whether we take more time for solitude and silence to promote our inner lives;
- Whether a husband and wife, unable to conceive in the normal manner, choose to go on the IVF program;
- Whether we carry a pregnancy to full term when we know the foetus is irreparably and profoundly disabled both mentally and physically;
- Whether an adult child stays at home to look after an invalid parent or sibling and thus places in jeopardy personal advancement or career opportunities of one kind or another;
- Whether we separate from a spouse when we find ourselves caught in a destructive relationship or seek an annulment or re-marry after a divorce;

⁵ These examples obviously do not include those people who are psychologically incapacitated. Nor does it include those who are profoundly insensitive and thoughtless or those who can only see life in clear-cut, black and white terms or those who have so deadened their consciences that they are not troubled by moral challenges or doubts of any kind.

- Whether we ask one of our children to leave home because he or she is behaving in a way that is deleterious to the life of the family.

Such situations normally do not yield to easy answers. They are not just “problems” that have “solutions.” In fact they are life situations that plunge us into a dilemma. Often enough there is no obvious “right” way forward. Should we choose this or would it be better to choose that? Maybe this is the better way to go, maybe that? We ponder the possible consequences “if such and such, then”.

How are we likely to experience serious dilemmas?

If it is a truly significant decision to be made, our waking thoughts may be more or less pre-occupied with this matter. In the rest of our lives we may “go through the motions” until there is some resolution. It not only invades our minds and emotions, it seems to invade our bodies. It can wear us out.

So what is happening? Let us see if we can suggest some of the things that may be going on here:

- Firstly, we *feel different* in the dilemma to when we are not in the dilemma; our emotions seem to have a life and force beyond us; there is something beyond our control here;
- Secondly, we *think differently*; again, our thoughts seem to have a life and force beyond us; again, there is something beyond our control here;
- Thirdly, it gets into our *bodies*; we may get a burdened look about us or just feel our bodies as tense; we may even feel a sort of numbness in our bodies; again, there is something beyond our control here;
- Fourthly, a lot of *energy* is used to live through such moments; there is nothing quite so energy-sapping as a very significant “Yes” and a “No” fighting each other inside us;
- Fifthly, our lives, in a sense, *stall* – or can seem to; the mix of emotions and thoughts seems to bring us to an impasse – we cannot move on, but we must move on and the moving on passes through this particular territory where we do not know the way;
- Sixthly, this process can become a downward spiral if we are not able to see our way through to making a *decision* that satisfies us;
- Seventhly, once a satisfying decision is made there is *resolution and the relief* can be profound. Where there was turmoil in our emotions and our thinking, there is now some peace. Good decisions are more or less energizing and liberating – even if they may also be painful;
- Eighthly, living through such processes well is the stuff of maturation – we will never grow up if we do not engage this journey and the better we engage it the better for our lives and the lives of those around us. And one of the

paradoxes of life is that the process of honest and courageous engagement is much more important than actually making the right decision.

We are made aware, in such dilemmas, of the fact that moving ahead in life demands – among other things – some kind of an ability to *appraise* what is going on, what life is asking of us. We need to be able to weigh things up and assess validity and value, keep things in perspective and maintain some kind of focus amidst it all. And this is much more than a merely rational process.

In these moments we welcome the wisdom of someone who can help us make the decision well. And we welcome the loving presence of those who can accompany us, even in silence, as we live through to the decision. But in the end *we* have to make the decision ourselves and *we* must take responsibility for that decision.⁶

Setting a context

During this course every construct we have dealt with is relevant to our discussion of appraisal. The emphasis on relationships and conversation is highly significant as this emphasis is most likely to enhance our ability to make good appraisals in living.

We noted that when the primacy of relationships is replaced by the primacy of “details,” we shift out of the journey into life and become vulnerable to such forces as bigotry and sectarianism. Clearly from such positions – ie bigotry and sectarianism – the ability to make good appraisals will be severely inhibited. We are not likely to make good appraisals when we are dominated by an idealized image or when we look at the world through the template of an ideology or when we are driven by anxiety or heavily influenced by disturbing memories or filled with chronic anger or carrying bundles of death around with us.

⁶ Different cultures and traditions have provided special people and rituals to assist with important decision-making processes in life. Many cultures have maintained more or less sophisticated symbolic systems to enable individuals and groups to move through the transition that life is asking for. Thus we have “shamans” and “witch doctors” and “priests” and various “wisdom figures”, we have “walkabout” and “sweat houses” and “retreats.” We might wonder how Western cultures serve the needs for appraisal at this time. How do we find our way through the mazes life draws us into? Who are the wisdom figures in these “post-modern” times? How do we submit to the rhythms of being and address the issues existence demands we address, and do it all in such a way that we come out the other side the better for having made the journey? The priest or pastor was largely supplanted in Western cultures in the middle of the 20th century by the therapist. While therapists remain very much in demand at the beginning of the 21st century – perhaps alarmingly so – other would-be “wisdom figures” have emerged in the huge self-help industry that has burgeoned in recent years, for example on talk-back radio or in the business seminars (“Six Steps To Unlock Your Future” etc) or episodically through the latest film or the latest best-selling novel. The emergence of the recent phenomenon of “life coaching” as a university course is also worth noting, as is the extent of drug-taking – licit and illicit – in the community.

The following constructs we have used in this course are of particular relevance to the appraisal process:

- *The mystery* – all of life is caught up in a mysterious, beneficent, meaningful, never-ending giving and receiving of form; at the core of this mystery is grace – existence is gift; living is a participation in and manifestation of this mystery which in turn reflects the Great Mystery;⁷
- *Formation field* – concretely, the formation mystery is experienced in a more or less predictable pattern of forming influences; a healthy life formation process is aware of and actively embraces all poles of the formation field;⁸
- *Freedom* – genuine human formation is marked by an expanding margin of freedom; how we express our freedom will have a huge impact on the formation of our lives in general and our margin of freedom in particular; the highest freedom is the ability to be what I must be; concretely, the last of the freedoms is the ability to choose and attitude;⁹
- *Formative thinking* – as thinking beings we are open to both the functional and the transcendent; both must be actively present in our thinking; this affects the growth and expression of our freedom;¹⁰ together with thinking we might also recall imagining, remembering and anticipating;
- *Formative willing* – as willing beings we are also open to both the functional and transcendent; both must be actively present in our willing;¹¹ when we fall into will-lessness – the failure to step forward, as it were, and take responsibility – or willfulness – the failure to listen to reality and the consequent imposition of oneself on the situation – we diminish our freedom and minimize the possibilities of the formation mystery being experienced as gift; when we are authentically willing we engage life as conversation, we participate in the formation mystery attentively, moment by moment, facilitating the emergence of the true, the good and the real;
- *Form potency* – we all need to gain and maintain the conviction that we are able to participate in the formation mystery; essential to the gaining and maintenance of this conviction is the exercise of freedom through decision-making.¹²
- *The obedience pattern and the detachment patter* – in a healthy life formation process we are constantly listening, hearing and submitting to what is real; this in turn will have us constantly letting go and moving on.

⁷ See Unit One, Session Two.

⁸ See Unit One, Session Three.

⁹ See Unit One, Session Four.

¹⁰ See Unit Two, Sessions Four and Five.

¹¹ See Unit Two, Sessions Six and Seven.

¹² See Unit One, Session Five.

All aspects of human life formation are of a piece. Appraisal operates – for better or worse – at the heart of it all. For life is not so much what happens to us but what we do with what happens. Life is *response* or it is nothing. Our responses to what life is asking at any given moment will to a large extent determine the shape of our lives. Thomas Merton sums it up well when he writes:

“Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. Causes have effects, and if we lie to ourselves and to others, then we cannot expect to find truth and reality whenever we happen to want them. If we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it!”¹³

Any healthy life formation process will maximise the margin of freedom by seeking out and facilitating the ultimate freedom – the ability to be who I am. This will mean:

- facing what must be faced in life,
- being honest with yourself,
- repeatedly holding up to the light all those little acts of pretence and denial and evasion and game playing,
- living through the dying that each day asks of you,
- listening, attentiveness and alertness to what is happening in and around you.

Describing appraisal

We could describe appraisal as *that process by which we come to see and engage more deeply truth, goodness, beauty and unity in our lives*. Appraisal includes:

- Thinking, but is much more than thinking;
- Feeling, but it is much more than feeling;
- Bodily awareness, but is much more than bodily awareness;
- Imagination but is much more than imagination;
- Anticipation, but is much more than anticipation;
- Memory, but is much more than memory;
- The processes of different levels of consciousness.

¹³ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, 1961, 31-32.

It is a *process of the person*, acting *as person*. The process is developed, more or less well, in the business of living. In one person, the mind may be foremost in the appraisal process, in another it might be feeling, in yet another it might be the body, and so on.

There is, of course, nothing magical about this. Life never succumbs to magic. Even with the best appraisal in the world, we may find ourselves face to face with dilemmas that leave us confused and torn. Life is like that. It can be awfully harrowing.

But with an honest and realistic commitment to good appraisal, we might at least resist the temptation to force the issue, we might be honest and wise enough to know that we do not know, and we might be humbly prepared to live with our limitations.

We may in fact come slowly to realise that “getting it right” is not what life is ultimately about. Life is rather about a journey into relationships, a movement more and more deeply into communion – with the mystery, with ourselves, with other people and with the world. Even our mistakes and blunders can become constructively part of that movement if we are honest about them. One contemporary author describes the journey this way:

Imagine the story of a man born a prisoner – doubly a prisoner in fact for he is unaware of his servitude. He has been taught that his servitude is normal, and has even been led to be grateful for it. Then at one point or another, this man awakens; slowly he begins to recognise the state in which he has been living. Moreover, he recognises that he himself and no one else, has been responsible for that state. He acquiesced in it; he was satisfied in it; he was grateful for it. And yet, now that he sees his former self-deception, he realises that he could have recognised it long ago. Even then he had the power that he has now: the power to attend, to question, to discuss and to break free. Step by step he begins to act like a free man, penetrating one self-deception after another, often discouraged by what he discovers about himself, but refusing to quit, even when he catches himself in continuing dishonesties. (In the attempt to be honest, are not one's own dishonesties the greatest sorrows?) Thus, never wholly equal to his relentless drive to question, he learns to fashion small acts of honesty, courage and freedom.¹⁴

We might summarise the appraisal process by thinking of it in terms of *background preparation* on the one hand, and *immediate process* on the other. The *background preparation* might include such things as the following:

¹⁴ Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness*, Harper and Row, 1970, 81.

- Firstly, live in *obedience*; practise listening and attentiveness at all times, foster the self-transcending, Mystery-centred life;¹⁵ for the Christian, this includes immersing himself/herself in the life of the Christian community, its practices and teachings;
- Secondly, foster *detachment* in your life; in daily life submit generously to the demands of life, letting go and moving on as life ask it of you; nurture the sense of being a pilgrim; you are going somewhere;
- Thirdly, pay particular attention to *the concrete facts* of your existence, get into the habit of being ruthlessly honest with yourself about what is actually happening, work with the definite and the actual and the finite, the ordinary manifestations and demands of reality in *this* moment and *this* place; submit to what is and resist the seductions of the extraordinary and the fanciful “wait until” and “only if”;¹⁶
- Fourthly, grow accustomed to *choosing* and holding yourself *accountable* and *responsible* for your life; in other words, learn by doing, discover the path by walking it;
- Fifthly, remember that the aim of life is *to live* – not to get it right; and *to live* is to be in communion; life is gracious and typically allows us a good margin of error and failure; often enough, we learn much more from our failures than our successes; it is in those failures especially that we are likely to experience affinity and communion with other mortals.

The *immediate* process of appraisal might include such things as the following:

- Firstly, clarify the *end* in the particular situation – what matters in the end? – what is the most important point in this whole thing? It might be appropriate to ask, “What do I *want* as distinct from what do I *like*?” – and listen within.
- Secondly, it normally helps to *speak with someone who is honest and who is a good listener*; you do not want someone who is going to rescue you or even make the decision for you; *you* are going to make the decision and you just need some facilitation to clarify the issues and perhaps some support to do what, in your heart of hearts, you perhaps already intuit you must do; as you speak with that other person, listen to what is happening within you;
- Thirdly, bring the matter to *prayer*; share the struggle with God; listen attentively within as you do that; this is not an attempt to elicit some kind of magical outcome by divine intervention, it is rather a realistic recognition that prayer opens us to a wider reality and helps to dispose us to the True and the

¹⁵ See Unit Three, Session Seven, “Obedience”.

¹⁶ See the quotation from Merton in the Snippets for meditation at the end of these notes: “*Very often, the inertia and repugnance which characterizes the so-called ‘spiritual life’ of many Christians*”

Good, the Beautiful and the One; in the Presence of the Transcendent we gain perspective and courage;

- Fourthly, recognise and respect the *timing* of the appraisal process; it is not an ego-functional process that submits to strategy and mastery; it comes as *grace*; your primary task is a facilitative and listening one, even though you must, at some point, decide;
- Fifthly, sometimes it assists the process if you “*try on*” one or other of the options before you actually make your choice – what would it be like if I chose this? Again, listen within.
- Sixthly, be *attentive to any prejudices* that might inhibit your appraisal – for example, fears, anxieties, false guilt and so on;
- Seventhly, after a reasonable length of time, *make a decision*; life must go on and it will not go on until you decide; having given yourself to this process generously and sincerely, the *deciding* is more important than making the right decision; an honest mistake is much more likely to make us human than a refusal to decide out of a fear that we will make a mistake.

The consonant life form

The work of appraisal, if it is effective, engenders a harmonious lifestyle, one we could call consonant. Such a life will be characterised by at least three traits:

- *Congeniality* – a growing sense of being more or less at home with oneself;
- *Compatibility* – a growing sense of communion with others and an ability to relate well with them;
- *Compassion* – a growing sense of appreciation that human life is always “fallen” and is more deserving of forgiveness than judgement.

The growing harmony of such a life will enhance the person’s ability to make effective appraisals. Situations and possibilities will “resonate” or “ring true” or else they will experience “dissonance” and “disharmony”. Furthermore, those who live a more or less consonant life form will tend to engender effective appraisal in the groups of which they are members.



CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** For the Christian, the work of appraisal is a work of graced synergy – our spirit and the Holy Spirit bear united witness to truth, goodness, beauty and unity (cf Romans 8:16).*

** For the Christian, the work of appraisal is ultimately about becoming more aligned with God and God’s ways and therefore more aware that it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me (cf Galatians 2:20).*



Jesus’ mission

There is a passage in Matthew’s Gospel – also found in Luke – which has often been read as a straightforward revelation of God’s intentions. The passage – Matthew 16:13-20 – tells of a conversation between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus asks:

Who do people say the Son of man is?

The disciples respond:

Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

Then Jesus asks the disciples directly:

Who do you say I am?

Simon Peter speaks up on behalf of the disciples:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Such a passage may seem straightforward to a mindset that does not believe in the fullness of Jesus’ humanity.¹⁷ What if we were to read that passage mindful of

¹⁷ It is relevant to recall the heresy known as *docetism*. The naming of this heresy is based on the Greek word *dokein* meaning *to appear*. The central idea of the heresy is that Jesus who was definitely God, only *appeared* to be human. Karl Rahner notes: “In the ordinary religious life of the Christian, Christ finds a place only as God” (“Current Problems in Christology” in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Volume I*, Helicon, 1961, 165). Another theologian supports Rahner: “Popular Christology has always been dominantly docetic. That is to say, Christ only appeared to be a man, or looked like a man: ‘underneath’ he was God. ... The traditional way of describing the incarnation almost invariably suggests that Jesus was really God almighty walking about on earth, dressed up as a man” (J A T Robinson, *Honest to God*, Westminster, 1963, 65 &

Jesus' emerging understanding of himself as "Son of man"? This dialogue with the disciples might reasonably be seen to reflect an inner dialogue and appraisal process that Jesus pursued. In other words, this questioning could reflect Jesus' process of self-discovery, his growing self-awareness and dawning sense of the direction of his life. This process would surely have entailed much struggle and questioning, a passage through the dark night of doubt and confusion, loneliness and fear.

There is an underlying theme throughout the Bible that the Lord of the Covenant will remain faithful. But the covenantal relationship is, concretely, a story of struggle and betrayal, tender romance and violent anger, rejection and forgiveness, long-suffering and jealousy, a daunting mixture of light and darkness, love and hatred. The ways of God are not always easily known, still less easily followed.

David had his moments.¹⁸ The Psalmist sometimes cries from "the depths."¹⁹ Isaiah says Yahweh is "a hidden God"²⁰ Jeremiah complains that Yahweh has "seduced" him and Yahweh's presence "seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones."²¹

And consider the vocations of Hosea and Jonas. Mary, the mother of Jesus, struggles with her own part in the covenant story.²² The Exodus journey into the desert will always remain the great symbol of the covenantal journey in every age, passing as it does through uncharted wastelands. Jesus' own journey into the desert is perhaps symbolic of the whole of his life.²³ The desert is not only the place where we learn appraisal, it is the place *par excellence* in which appraisal must be done.

A contemporary author sums up this biblical theme well when writing of St Thérèse of Lisieux:

Yes, but where is God in the silence and darkness, in the laboured beatings of the heart? Where is the idea of God in this uttermost emptiness? Perhaps after all the ultimate truth is not light and goodness but darkness and horror? Surely this terrible happening, this extreme anguish of the poor naked human spirit is proof that there is no God at all or that if there is he is without care of me? 'All thy billows and thy waves have passed over me The water compassed me about even to the soul ... the bars of the earth have shut me up for ever'. So spoke Jonas, and Job too under the silent heavens. It is indeed a note that is struck again and again in the Old Testament. But always the Lord comes to save, and is as it were thus, by this extremity, defined in the fullness of his

66).

¹⁸ See, for example, 2Samuel 7:18-29 – "David's prayer".

¹⁹ See, for example, Psalm 130 – "Out of the depths". See also Psalm 22 which Jesus prayed on the cross.

²⁰ See Isaiah 45:15.

²¹ See Jeremiah 20:7-9.

²² See, for example, Luke 1:38 and 2:52.

²³ See Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13.

*saviourhood. Jesus comes as the one who saves, the God who saves. Yet he is also Jonas and he enters into the darkness of Gethsemane and the darkness of the tomb.*²⁴

We will find no magical formulae in the Bible or the writings of the great guides. If there is one thing that is evident from the life of Jesus it is that the Covenant is central. The relationship of intimacy with God – a relationship that is first and last God’s initiative – is to be fostered as the basis for the whole of life. That *is* our life. In the final analysis, we will seldom have the way ahead appear clearly before us. The evidence of the tradition, in fact, would suggest that as we mature, the way ahead will be fraught with paradox and ambiguity and surprise. Perhaps that is a test of whether or not we are living well: Are you still surprised often by life?

This is the way of abandonment and surrender, when the immaturity of simply doing the “right thing” will be transformed by being in love, when knowing and understanding what we believe and how we should proceed will be transformed by the overwhelming sense of God’s gracious Presence. Increasingly the essence of life will emerge to capture and absorb us – and the essence of life is found in the fulfilment of relationships with God, ourselves, other people and the created world. The essence of life – it slowly dawns on us – is Love. Thus Merton’s famous prayer reflects this beautifully:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I do not do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*²⁵

A note on conscience

a. Beyond the biblical tradition

Conscience lies at the heart of the experience of appraisal. The English word “conscience” comes from the Latin word *conscientia* – literally meaning “knowledge or consciousness with (self)”.

²⁴ Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie*, Templegate, 1979, 74.

²⁵ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Farrar Straus and Cudahy, 1958, 83.

This English word “conscience” is generally used to translate the Greek word *suneidēsis*, which carries the same meaning as the Latin word *conscientia*.

In pre-Christian Greek literature we find the word *suneidēsis* used in the middle of the 5th century BC by Democritus. It is used to describe the sense one has when one does what one knows to be wrong. In other words, it is *consequent upon* an action rather than *antecedent to* an action, and it is about sensing *the evil* rather than sensing what is *good*. This was the general use of the word in the Greek culture until the Christian era.

In *pre-Christian Latin literature* we find the word *conscientia* used frequently – especially by the Stoics. The usage in Latin implies a more developed concept, one that includes both *antecedent* and *consequent* awareness, and an awareness of both *evil* and *good*. Cicero said that the consciousness of a life well-spent and remembrance of numerous deeds well done is the cause of the greatest joy. Seneca encourages his young friend Lucilius:

*It is not a matter of raising hands to heaven nor of beseeching some temple-keeper to give us access to the sanctuary as if in that way we would be more easily heard: God is near you, he is with you, he is within. Thus do I say Lucilius: a sacred and august spirit resides within us and takes stock of our good and evil actions and is the guardian or avenger of our deeds. Just as he is treated by us so does he treat us.*²⁶

b. The Jewish Scriptures

The word for “conscience”, as such, does not appear in the Hebrew of the Jewish Scriptures. In the Septuagint, the Greek word *suneidēsis* (generally translated in English as “conscience”) appears perhaps 3 times (eg Ecclesiastes 10:20; Wisdom 17:10; Ecclesiasticus 42:18), all of a very late date.

However, the essential concept is definitely found there in terms like “loins” and “heart” signifying the inner person, made by and known to God. The Jewish Scriptures point unambiguously to the very seat of “conscience” (eg Psalms 7:10 and 25:2; Jeremiah 11:20, 17:10, 20:12 etc). For the people of the Jewish Scriptures the feelings and reactions of the “loins” and “heart” represented the voice of God.

The Prophets’ role was to remind the people of what they had forgotten, to awaken those deeper reaches of the inner person so that they could recover their identity in the Covenant.

²⁶ Letter 41:4.

c. The Christian Scriptures

The actual term is not found in the Gospels (with the special exception of John 8:9²⁷), though, just as in the Hebrew Scriptures, a word such as “heart” as used in the Gospels carries the same sense. The Gospels thus are in the tradition of the Jewish Scriptures.

Suneidēsis is found some 30 times in the rest of the Christian Scriptures. St Paul uses it 20 times and gives it a new and richer meaning.

We can make two particular points about the use of the word *suneidēsis* (“conscience”) in the Christian Scriptures:

- Firstly, it means a consciousness of the true moral content of human life founded on faith – that Covenant relationship with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit which underpins and shapes the whole of a Christian’s life (eg Romans 14:1 & 23; 13:5; 1Peter 2:19); in the Christian Scriptures “conscience” is in fact identified with the gift of faith (eg Romans 13:5; 1Corinthians 14:4; 1Peter 2:19; 1John 3:19-22) ;
- Secondly, in the work of applying this new Christian attitude to the business of daily living, “conscience” needs the practical guidance of Christian wisdom in the Christian life because even a good conscience might react naively and prompt actions and behaviour that are unhelpful or even destructive – it needs to be tempered with prudence and common sense and genuine wisdom (eg Philippians 2:12; Ephesians 4:13; 1Corinthians 8:7-13; 10:27-30).

d. Christian tradition

In the Christian Tradition the general understanding of “conscience” developed in the Christian Scriptures, particularly by St Paul, pertained in both East and West. St Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), probably more than any other thinker, developed the notion of conscience, calling on the Christian Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church and Aristotle to present an original articulation (eg ST 1a, 79.12 & 13). In one place St Thomas writes of the place of conscience:

*Every conscience, whether it is right or wrong, whether it concerns things evil in themselves or things morally indifferent, obliges us to act in such a way that he who acts against his conscience sins.*²⁸

²⁷ This is the occasion the men brought to Jesus “the woman caught in adultery.” He challenges the one “without sin” to cast the first stone. By implication we could say he is appealing to their sense of good and evil they all bear within, a sense beyond the Law.

²⁸ *Quodlibetum*, 3:27. The Second Vatican Council’s *Dignitatis Humanae* – “Declaration on Religious Freedom” – echoes this teaching when it says: “In all our activities we human beings are bound to follow our consciences faithfully, in order that we may come to God, for whom we

In the Catholic tradition in the West, the development of our understanding of conscience was affected by a tendency towards moralism with its attendant legalism and casuistry. The Reformation of the 16th century also had a profound effect on the way conscience was viewed in the Western Catholic tradition. The trend was to set aside the Pauline emphasis on prudence and practical wisdom and emphasise, instead, the external law. In the 19th century, Popes Gregory XVI and Pius IX both condemned conscience. In 1832 Gregory XIV used the word “deliramentum” (“nonsense” or “madness”) to express what he thought of conscience. In December 1864, Pius IX, in the infamous *Syllabus of Errors*, made it very clear that resorting to conscience was in effect defiance of the Church and her legitimate authority.

One hundred years on from the *Syllabus*, the Second Vatican Council began to redress the balance. In *Gaudium et spes*, (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” – published December 7 1965) 16 & 17 we read:

16. In the depths of our consciences, we detect a law which we do not impose upon ourselves, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to the heart: do this, shun that. For we have in our hearts a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of the human person; according to it we will be judged (cf. Rm 2:15-16). Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a human being. There we are alone with God, whose voice echoes in our depths (Cf. John XXIII, Encyclical Letter Mater et Magistra (May 15, 1961): AAS 53 (1961), 417). In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor (cf. Mt 22:37-40; Gal 5:14). In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of the human family in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence, the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for those who care but little for truth and

were created. It follows that we are not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to our consciences. Nor, on the other hand are we to be restrained from acting in accordance with our consciences, especially in matters religious.” (3.2) The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, also relied on this thinking when they wrote in a Pastoral Letter on the Application of *Humanae Vitae* in 1974: “It is not impossible ... that an individual may fully accept the teaching authority of the Pope in general, may be aware of his teaching in this matter, and yet reach a position after honest study and prayer that is at variance with the papal teaching. Such a person could be without blame; he would certainly not have cut himself off from the Church; and in acting in accordance with his conscience he could be without subjective fault.” Two years after this statement from the Conference, the Conference issued another statement – “To the Directors of Catholic Planning Centres” (1976) – which some have claimed abrogated the earlier teaching. If the Conference had intended to abrogate its earlier teaching it would surely have made this clear.

goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.

17. Only in freedom can we direct ourselves toward goodness. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within the human person. For God has willed that we remain "under the control of our own decisions" (cf. Sir 15:14) so that we can seek our Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to him. Hence, our dignity demands that we act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. We achieve such dignity when, emancipating ourselves from all captivity to passion, we pursue our goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for ourselves through effective and skillful action, apt helps to that end. Since our freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgment seat of God each of us must render an account of our own life, whether we have done good or evil (cf. 2 Cor 5:10).

In *Dignitatis Humanae*, ("Declaration on Religious Freedom" – published December 7 1965) 3.2, we read:

In all our activities we are bound to follow our conscience faithfully, in order that we may come to God, for whom we were created. It follows that we are not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to our conscience. Nor, on the other hand are we to be restrained from acting in accordance with our conscience, especially in matters religious.

Following the Second Vatican Council we have statements such as the following:

In the final analysis conscience is inviolable and no man is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience, as the moral tradition of the Church attests.²⁹

People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it.³⁰

²⁹ Official Communication of The Sacred Congregation of the Clergy, April 26, 1971, II, 5. A group of priests in the archdiocese of Washington ("The Washington Nineteen") had published a "Statement of Conscience" in which they dissented from Pope Paul VI's teaching in *Humanae Vitae* (1968). The priests were restricted in their faculties as a result of this public dissent. The priests appealed to Rome. The Sacred Congregation for the Clergy investigated and produced this Official Communication.

³⁰ Pope John Paul II, Message for World Peace Day 1999.

Respect for a person's conscience, where the image of God himself is reflected (cf. Gen 1:26-27), means that we can only propose the truth to others, who are then responsible for accepting it. To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offence against human dignity, and ultimately an offence against God whose image that person bears.³¹



³¹ Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Address, January 2002.

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“We forget at our peril that man is a symbol-making creature; and if the symbols (or myths, which are a pattern of symbols) seem arid and dead, they are to be mourned rather than denied. The bankruptcy of symbols should be seen for what it is, a way station on the path of despair.”*³²



(2) *“I began my study of the relation between myth and culture some years ago when, as a young man, I lived and taught in Greece. What particularly intrigued me was the way the ancient Greeks seemed to handle their anxiety and other psychological problems. In the classical phase of Greek culture, anxiety in our modern sense did not seem to emerge as an overt problem.*

“I could not escape the implication that in certain historic periods, the culture provides the help which the individual needs to face the crises of life – birth, adolescence, marriage, procreation, death – so that he does not experience the profound insecurity, self-doubt and inner conflict which we associate with anxiety.

“But scarcely do we propose a discussion of myth and culture when we are confronted by an almost insurmountable obstacle – that is, the myth that we live a ‘mythless existence’. Myths and symbols are scorned and rejected or, at best, taken as unreal, imaginary, and, at worst, become synonyms for ‘falsehood’. The wide prevalence of anxiety and alienation in our society is, I believe, bound up with our rejection of the language of myth. Jerome Bruner put it well: ‘When the myths of society are no longer adequate to man’s plight, the individual first takes refuge in mythoclasm and then he undertakes the lonely search for inner identity’.

*“At the outset I shall state the hypothesis which then took shape in my mind: Psychotherapy, and the problems which lead people to come in numbers for psychological help, emerge at a particular point in the historic development of a culture – that is the point where the myths and symbols of the culture disintegrate. The values of the culture are mediated by these myths and symbols, and with their breakdown comes the inner conflict which sends people to psychotherapy.”*³³



³² Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*, Fontana Books, 1976, 70.

³³ Rollo May, “Myths and Culture: Their Death and Transformation”, *Cross Currents*, XXXIII, 1 (Spring 1983), 1 (1-16).

(3) *“A decision reached without deliberation, without examining and evaluating all aspects of the question or choice that confronts us, can lead to impulsive, unconsidered, and ill-advised action. This may often involve us in blunders which can damage ourselves and others.”*³⁴



(4) *“Then to all he said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it. What gain, then, is it for a man to have won the whole world and to have lost or ruined his very self?'*”³⁵



(5) *“God of our ancestors, Lord of mercy, who by your word have made the universe, and in your wisdom have fitted human beings to rule the creatures that you have made, to govern the world in holiness and saving justice and in honesty of soul to dispense fair judgement, grant me Wisdom, consort of your throne, and do not reject me from the number of your children. For I am your servant, son of your serving maid, a feeble man, with little time to live, with small understanding of justice and the laws. Indeed, were anyone perfect among the sons of men, if he lacked the Wisdom that comes from you, he would still count for nothing.”*³⁶



(6) *“Yet the living Truth, the great breaker of idols and destroyer of false gods, is ultimately easier to live with than the most comforting of lies. It is better to lose the God we found it easy to envisage, and the faith that was only a protection from our fears, and stand naked and unknowing in the presence of the One who can only really be known when he is lived with. At least with that God we can, and indeed, must begin from where we are. There can be no becoming that does not start from something that already is.”*³⁷



(7) *“For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialised from cloud or*

³⁴ Roberto Assagioli, *The Act of Will*, Viking Press, 1973, 151.

³⁵ Luke 9:23-26.

³⁶ Wisdom 9:1-6.

³⁷ Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK/Paulist, 1976, 11.

risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows.'

*"The American poet Robert Frost is here describing the experience by which a poem comes into being, a kind of creative recognition of what is somehow already obscurely known. It may seem a somewhat startling leap to make, but to the great spiritual masters of the undivided Church, the revealed doctrine of man as having been made in the image of God universally inspires this feeling of glad recognition. They go on, in fact, to take it seriously for what it claims to be, a long lost memory of their true selves, and from that all the rest they have to say follows. Their doctrine is concerned to arouse in their disciples a sense of the implications of a memory they believe could not have been initially re-awakened without a divine intervention."*³⁸



(8) *"Only in freedom can man direct himself towards goodness. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man."*³⁹



(9) *"The fundamental polarity of human life between what is and what ought to be, between lack and fulfillment, between determination and freedom, is not abnormal; it is the norm. Every person is exposed to it because of the inescapable structure of human formation."*⁴⁰



(10) *"T.S. Eliot once said, there are two types of problems we face in life. In one case, the appropriate question is, what are we going to do about it? In the other case, the only fitting question is, how do we behave toward it? The deeper problems in life are of the latter kind. In the helping professions, the dividing line between these two questions falls roughly between the more glamorous systems of cure and the humbler action of care. But unfortunately, as Americans (given philosophically to pragmatism and culturally to technology) and especially as Americans in those professions that get tinged with a messianic pretension, we are used to tackling problems in terms of the first question; and we are bereft when that question is inappropriate to the crisis. If all we can say is, what are we going to do about it?--then dying indeed (and our own death as well) is even more intensively a blow to professional self-esteem. But this is not the only question we need to ask. The question remains as to our mode of*

³⁸ Aelred Squire, *op cit*, 15.

³⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" from the Second Vatican Council), 17.

⁴⁰ Adrian van Kaam. *The Transcendent Self*, Dimension, 1979, 172.

behavior toward an event which that behavior admittedly will not successfully dissolve. In extremity, it may not be possible to do something about a tragedy, but this inability need not altogether disable us humanly before it. Members of the helping professions belong to a network of care and not simply to an apparatus for cure."⁴¹



(11) *"Nothing is ever completed ... Incompleteness is a part of nature and it takes great art or great wisdom to know when to lay down the brush ... we should always avoid perfectionism."*⁴²



(12) *"See, today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster...."*⁴³



(13) *"When Christ freed us he meant us to remain free."*⁴⁴



(14) *"Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid dreams: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, the providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that otherwise would never have occurred. A whole stream of events issue forth from the decision raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and mutual assistance, which no one could have dreamt would have come his way. 'Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.'*"⁴⁵



⁴¹ William F. May, "The Sacred Power of Death in Contemporary Experience", in A Mack (Ed.), *Death_in_American_Experience*, Schoken, 1973, 120-121.

⁴² Jean Monnet. *Memoirs*, (trans) Richard Mayne, Doubleday, 1978, 521.

⁴³ Deuteronomy 30:15f.

⁴⁴ Galatians 5:1.

⁴⁵ Herman Hesse? - source unknown. This same quotation may be found in Susan S Trout, *To See Differently: Personal Growth and Being of Service Through Attitudinal Healing*, Three Roses Press, 1990/1996, 30-31. I think the last two sentences come from Goethe?

(15) *“Most of us are cases of arrested development without sexual experience of some kind, without the experience of deep commitment and deep betrayal, and deeper forgiveness and capacity for compassion that ideally grow from these haunted relationships of sin and redemption at the heart of our mortality ... It is in the process of suffering through these relationships that we learn what commitment is all about, that we begin to learn the price of loving, hoping, forgiving, and trusting beyond any rational base, even if the relationship, to an individual or a community, comes to an end.”*⁴⁶



(16) *“The sense of things does not at all reside in the ready-made provisions that the sedentary people consume, but in the heat of transformation, of walking, or of desire. Then you will say to me, towards what shall I aspire, since the goals have no significance? And I would answer you ... that to prepare the future is only to found the present. And let those others wear themselves out in Utopia and in dream conduct which follows distant images, fruit of their invention. For the sole true invention is to decipher the present under its incoherent aspects and its contradictory language.”*⁴⁷



(17) *“I can see one element in this strange fascination of war which men have not adequately noted. It reduces life to simple terms. The modern man lives in such a complex world that one wonders how his sanity is maintained as well as it is. Every moral venture, every social situation and every practical problem involves a whole series of conflicting loyalties, and a man may never be quite sure that he is right in giving himself to the one as against the other. Shall he be just and sacrifice love? Shall he strive for beauty and do it by gaining the social privileges which destroy his sense of fellowship with the under-privileged? Shall he serve his family and neglect the state? Or be patriotic to the detriment of the great family of mankind? Shall he be diligent at the expense of his health? Or keep healthy at the expense of the great cause in which he is interested? Shall he be truthful and therefore cruel? Or shall he be kind and therefore a little soft? Shall he strive for the amenities of life and make life less robust in the process? Or shall he make courage the ultimate virtue and brush aside the virtues which a stable and therefore soft society has cultivated?”*

“Out of this mesh of conflicting claims, interests, loyalties, ideals, values and communities he is rescued by the psychology of war which gives the state at least a momentary priority over all other communities and which makes courage the

⁴⁶ Maggie Ross, *The Fountain and the Furnace*, Paulist, 1987, 66.

⁴⁷ Antoine Saint-Exupery cited by R Linssen, *Living Zen*, Grove Press, 1958/1988, 113f.

supreme virtue. I talked to a young captain at camp last week who told me how happy he was in the army because he had "found him- self" in military service. Our further conversation led me to suspect that it was this simplification of life which had really brought him happiness; that and his love of authority.

"Unfortunately, all these momentary simplifications of the complexities of life cannot be finally satisfying, because they do violence to life. The imperiled community may for a moment claim a kind of unqualified loyalty which no community or cause has the right or ability to secure in normal times. But judgment returns to sobriety as events become less disjointed and the world is once more revealed in all its con- fusion of good in evil and evil in good. The imperiled community was threatened because of its vice as much as because of its virtue, and the diabolical foe reassumes the lineaments of our common humanity. Physical courage is proved unequal to the task of ennobling man without the aid of other virtues, and the same men who have been raised to great heights by the self- forgetfulness of war have been sunk into new depths of hatred. There is only momentary peace in an all-consuming passion, except it be a passion for what is indubitably the best. And what is the best?"⁴⁸



(18) *"Very often, the inertia and repugnance which characterizes the so-called "spiritual life" of many Christians could perhaps be cured by a simple respect for the concrete realities of every-day life, for nature, for the body, for one's work, one's friends, one's surroundings, etc. A false supernaturalism which imagines that 'the supernatural' is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature, offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life. Without such roots, it can produce nothing but the ashen fruits of disgust, acedia, and even morbid and degenerate introversion, masochism, dolorism, negation. Nietzsche pitilessly exposed the hopeless mess*

⁴⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Meridian Books, 1957/1970, 35-37. This book is a reprint of personal journal pieces that were originally published in 1929. This particular piece was written in 1918. Reinhold Niebuhr was born on June 21, 1892, in Wright City, Mo., USA and died on June 1, 1971, in Stockbridge, Mass. He was an American theologian in the Reformed tradition who had extensive influence on political thought and whose criticism of the prevailing theological liberalism of the 1920s significantly affected the intellectual climate within American Protestantism. His exposure, as a pastor in Detroit, to the problems of American industrialism led him to join the Socialist Party for a time. A former pacifist, he actively persuaded Christians to support the war against Hitler and after World War II had considerable influence in the U.S. State Department. His most prominent theological work was *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which was planned as a synthesis of the theology of the Reformation with the insights of the Renaissance.

which results from this caricature of Christianity (see Emmanuel Mounier, The Spoils of the Violent)."⁴⁹



⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, Herder and Herder, 1969, 45.

Suggestions for further study

- Cinema *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) (Dir: Woody Allen with Caroline Aaron, Alan Alda etc.)
Fatal Attraction (1987) (Dir: Adrian Lyne with Michael Douglas and Glenn Close)
Sophie's Choice (1982) (Dir: Alan J Pakula with Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline – based on the William Styron book by the same name.)
- Collings, Ross, “A Dark God” in *The Way*, 33:1, (January 1993), 44-53.
Endo, Shusaku, *Silence* – section reproduced in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume IV*
- Futrell, John C, “Ignatian Discernment” in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, II:2 (April 1970).
- Gordon, Mary, *Final Payments*, Ballantine Books, 1978.
Lonsdale, D, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit*, DLT, 1992.
- Schaefer, A W and D Fassel, *The Addictive Organisation*, Harper and Row, 1990.
A. van Kaam, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Self Direction*, Dimension Books, 1976 – especially "Self Directive Appraisal", 201ff.
- Whelan, Michael, *The Call To Be*, St Pauls, 1986/2000 – especially Chapter 14 (“What Do You Mean By The Will Of God?”).
- Woititz, Janet G, *The Self-Sabotage Syndrome: Adult Children in the Workplace*, Health Communications, 1989. The same author also wrote the bestseller, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*.



Suggested exercises

1. Reflect on the motivation behind some of the bigger decisions of your life. How have they shaped your life's journey?
2. What might be the main guiding principle for you today if you have a big decision to make? In other words, what matters most to you?
3. Are you in any way impulsive or compulsive in your decision making? Are you perhaps excessively rational and/or wilful? What do you think is going on? Listen for the emotions involved when you catch yourself being impulsive or compulsive or rational or wilful.

