

Pope Francis's *public persona*, whether or not it is the true measure of the man, is of a figure who favors innovation over respect for tradition. As such, one can be reasonably suspicious about the real motives underlying *Traditionis Custodes*. The same Pope who eschews the title, "Vicar of Christ," and who shuns the apostolic palace in favor of a hotel room has in a very few strokes of his pen appeared to have made himself the master of Tradition.

Let it not go unsaid that the taste for the novelty in the actual practice of the *Novus Ordo* Mass, and the permanent state of *aggiornamento* in the Church, imply a commitment to a relativistic conception of the true and the good. Such relativism is the solvent not only of the Catholic Church, but of all things human.

In sum, this collection is a compendium of compelling and insightful works.

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Matthew Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Moral Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2021.

"In the contemporary discussion on what constitutes the essence of morality and how it can be recognized, the question of conscience has become paramount especially in the field of Catholic moral theology." So said then-Cardinal Ratzinger in a 1991 address on "Conscience and Truth." This theme of the connection between conscience and *truth*, especially the truth about the human person, was repeated incessantly by both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, the word "conscience" appears no fewer than 108 times, mostly in contexts where the Pope was attempting to correct modern errors.

But how did conscience become "paramount"? Neither Aquinas nor the Fathers give more than a passing nod to it, and when they do, they usually discuss it in relation to *synderesis*, the power by which we know the first principles of morality. For them, "conscience" is our power to apply those principles to particular situations—closer to what we today would call "prudence" or "making wise judgments." Aquinas and the Fathers are more interested in the faithful developing the Christian virtues. When and how did conscience take a central role in moral theology to such a degree that many manuals of moral theology from the turn of the century

begin with, or at least contain centrally, long and detailed discussions of “conscience?”

One answer to this question is that, when Catholic moral theology increasingly became dominated by moralities of obligation rather than a morality of virtue, guilt and culpability for violations of those moral obligations became central, especially in moral manuals written for priests hearing confessions rather than as exhortations to the moral life as would have been the case with the Fathers of the Church. Moral theology was increasingly taught by considering moral “cases,” a system popularly called “casuistry.” Let us say you are a servant, and your master tells you that you must carry a ladder to a house; you know that he plans to use it to climb up to a window so he can commit adultery with the lady of the house. Are you guilty of a sin? If so, what sin? Is it a mortal sin? A venial sin? Was this voluntary cooperation with evil or involuntary cooperation?

Regarding all such cases, there were various opinions, judgments, and accounts produced by different theological authorities. So then the question became, not only which action should I do or not do, but also (and for some theologians primarily) which theological authority should I follow. Predictably, various “schools” of thought arose, some more lax, some more strict, some that bid people to follow the opinion that seemed “most probable.” And on and on it went, in a tradition that increasingly came to resemble debates between the Pharisaical rabbis during the time of Christ.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, moral theologians increasingly became disenchanted with this approach and wished to return to a more biblical, exhortatory, and encouraging approach to moral theology. New moral manuals and books on moral theology appeared that once again relegated “conscience” to a secondary position within the larger framework of moral theology, and “conscience” had begun to diminish in importance leading up to the Second Vatican Council.

Oddly, however, since the Council, conscience has made something of a comeback. So much so that Matt Levering tells the story of a how a leading bishop told him in 2016 that, in his opinion, “the most exciting movement in Catholic moral theology today” is based on a renewed vision of conscience. (Levering notes that the bishop was speaking specifically about Fr. James Keenan’s article “Redeeming Conscience” in *Theological Studies*, but also likely had in mind paragraph 303 of Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.)

In many ways, the story of Catholic moral theology in the twentieth century is the story of how different moral theologians viewed conscience. Fortunately, we have an able scholar to recount that story with remarkable depth, clarity, and fairness: the redoubtable Matthew Levering. One

crucial question that faces anyone who takes up such a monumental task is how to organize the work of so many thinkers who approach conscience from so many angles. Rather than attempting a strictly chronological survey of various writers, Levering categorizes the theologians he considers into one of four categories, represented by the four main chapters in the book: “Conscience and the Bible,” “Conscience and the Moral Manuals,” “Conscience and the Thomists,” and “Conscience and German Thought.” In a fifth, concluding chapter, “The Path Forward,” he compares the recent work of Fr. James F. Keenan, SJ and the Catholic University of America’s Reinhard Hüter. This reviewer found the groupings instructive, allowing a better comparison between thinkers with more presuppositions in common.

The list of thinkers under each heading make up a Who’s Who of modern Catholic Theology, although some would likely be less well known to readers in the English-speaking world. In chapter 1 on “Conscience and the Bible,” one finds summaries of the work of George Tyrell, Hastings Rashdall, Rudolf Bultmann, C. A. Pierce, Yves Congar, Johannes Stelzenberger, Philippe Delhaye, and Richard B. Hayes.

Chapter 2’s treatment on “Conscience and the Moral Manuals” covers material likely least well known among most readers, since almost no one consults the moral manuals any more (except, as it turns out, Matt Levering), given the opprobrium heaped upon them by so many twentieth century theologians. It is interesting that the purported “legalism” of these “pre-Vatican II” manuals are viewed with such distaste given how similar their discussions of conscience are to more recent treatments, the main difference being that relative laxity of modern treatments as opposed to their earlier counterparts, not the underlying legalism of their conception of moral obligation.

In chapter 3, “Conscience and the Thomists,” we find sections on the thought of Benoit-Henri Merkelbach, OP, Michel Labourdette, OP, Eric D’Arcy, Reginald Doherty, OP, and Servais Pinckaers, OP. It will likely surprise no one that the chapter on the Thomists contains a list of prominent Dominicans.

Chapter 4, “Conscience and German Thought,” is probably the most crucial for understanding the direction of most modern thought on conscience. The terrain here is extremely difficult to navigate and requires an expert guide. Fortunately, Levering is up to the task, often expressing the thought of those on whom he is commenting more clearly than the original author. The reader will find in this chapter able summaries of the work of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, the two thinkers whose thought was most influential on the generation that followed, whether the person was inspired by them or reacting against them. Thus, we find accounts of con-

science in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, SJ, Josef Fuchs, SJ, Bernard Häring, CSsR, and Joseph Ratzinger.

For anyone interested in the currents of thought in twentieth century theology, this is an essential book. And yet, I feel I should include a certain caution. Though Levering is a thoughtful and perceptive writer, not all the people he surveys in this book are. He is like an expert documentary filmmaker doing a documentary on some exceedingly boring people. He does what he can, but the subject lacks a certain energy.

One gets the sense after a while that these people were playing a certain sort of parlor game. The people who enjoy that particular parlor game will likely find this book compelling the way people who love bridge love books about bridge. But those who don't play bridge usually find books about bridge either incomprehensible or tedious, even if they harbor a certain admiration for the intellect of prominent bridge players. Such may be the reaction some readers will have to this book. After several chapters of this stuff, one wonders whether we shouldn't just forget the whole sordid business and try a different approach to the moral life. A few thinkers included in the book have done just that, such as the late, great Servais Pinckaers.

But conscience has been, and in some quarters continues to be, an important topic. So a book such as this one that does as good a job as one could wish to help people understand the development of that tradition is warranted and welcome.

By the same token, I can't help but think of the comment made to me recently by a member of the Pontifical Congregation for the Causes of Saints. He told me that in well over half of the cases the Congregation is considering for beatification, the person reported that he had been inspired by the life and writings of St. Therese of Lisieux. He was not surprised at this, but as a moral theologian himself, it was giving him a great deal of food for thought. How many modern saints, one wonders, have been inspired to lead a life of Christian virtue and holiness by the works of these prominent modern moral theologians? That too might provide valuable food for thought—or cause for concern.

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