

Book REVIEW



Conscience under threat

BY FR KEVIN MCGOVERN

Christian Conscience

By Fr Norman Ford, Catholic Health Australia

AS WELL AS HARMING UNBORN children and pregnant women, the *Victorian Abortion Law Reform Act 2008* violates the consciences of health-care practitioners. Section 8, subsection 1, of the act requires practitioners with a conscientious objection to abortion to refer anyone who inquires about abortion to another practitioner. As one doctor remarked, this would be like saying: "I can't help you rob a bank myself. But I know someone down the road who can."

Subsections 3 and 4 then require first doctors and then nurses to perform or assist in an abortion in an emergency. Health-care practitioners are rightly concerned that 'emergency' may be understood flexibly so as to force them to participate in an abortion despite their conscientious objection.

In this context, Fr Norman Ford's book on *Christian Conscience* is timely indeed. At the same time, we would all benefit by accepting this invitation to think more deeply about conscience. It is too easy to take for granted this capacity within us to tell right from wrong. Fr Ford's book invites us to ponder what conscience is, to reflect on how we form our conscience, and to become a bit more adept at living conscientiously. Almost all of us would benefit from reflecting about these matters.

This book of 100 pages is divided into two parts, which are roughly equal in length. The first part is mostly Fr Ford's synthesis of the best of the traditional Catholic account of the conscience. After reference to the abortion act in chapter 1, this synthesis is found in chapters 2 and 3.

Nowadays, many people are deeply influenced by what is called moral relativism. This mistaken moral theory holds that if I feel comfortable doing something, it must therefore be morally acceptable. Fr Ford

corrects this mistaken view by his discussion of objective morality. True morality is based on the objective or real standard of our integral human good. This includes "good health, general wellbeing and genuine, lasting happiness" (p39). It is "what can satisfy, and not frustrate, one's basic natural inclinations and needs" (p7). An action is objectively morally right if it truly does promote our integral human good. On the other hand, "an immoral act is contrary to the good of the person" (p36).

The task of conscience, then, is to discover both what is truly good for us and therefore morally right, and what is truly bad for us and therefore morally wrong. Fr Ford emphasises the role of reason in this discernment, and defines conscience as "a sincere act of one's intellect or reason making a final judgement on the morality of a concrete proposal" (p6).

He notes that conscience begins with what has been called 'synderesis'. This is our intuitive grasp of the first moral principle that we must do good and avoid evil. From this foundation, we must then develop or form our conscience so that we really do understand what is objectively right or objectively wrong in the many decisions which we must make throughout our lives. Fr Ford quotes approvingly Sydney priest Fr Gerard Gleeson, who rightly observes that "the responsibility to form my conscience is more fundamental than the responsibility to follow my conscience" (p19).

Fr Ford explains that "a conscience is said to be certain when a person's judgement of conscience is believed to be true without any reasonable fear of error" (p19). He repeats the traditional Catholic teaching that, even if this places heavy demands on us, "we are morally bound by a certain judgement of conscience". A certain conscience involves a "categorical and unconditional imperative" which we ignore at our peril (p10).

There is much more in Fr Ford's synthesis of the traditional Catholic account of conscience, including an account of the moral principles of conscience (pp20-26) and of the principle of cooperation (pp26-30). I hope that I have whetted the reader's appetite for more!

Part 2 of the book reviews important writings about conscience in the Catholic tradition. There is a

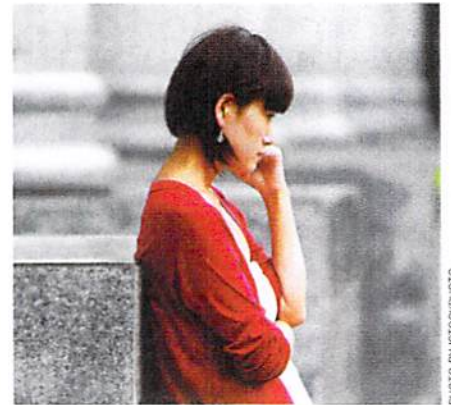


PHOTO BY ISTOCKPHOTO

"the responsibility to form my conscience is more fundamental than the responsibility to follow my conscience"

— FR GERARD GLEESON

chapter mostly about that 'champion of conscience' St Paul. There are chapters about 13th-century St Thomas Aquinas, and soon-to-be-beatified Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890).

There is a short chapter on the Church's official teaching about conscience. This includes brief extracts from the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In my opinion, more needed to be said here, especially when Fr Ford briefly addresses what should happen when a Catholic perceives a conflict between his or her conscience and Catholic teaching.

Finally, there is a chapter about arguably the most influential moral theologian of the 20th century, Fr Bernard Häring (1912-1998).

Fr Ford's *Christian Conscience* can be ordered from the Catholic Health Australia website for \$40 (which includes postage and handling). It should be of particular interest to Catholic health-care professionals, Catholic priests and Church workers, and all Catholic people who want to reflect on that marvellous capacity within us to tell right from wrong and on the many insights of the traditional Catholic account of conscience. ■

Fr Kevin McGovern is Director of the Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics, which is sponsored by Victoria's Catholic hospitals.