

where the Mother House is situated, over the vast field of the world, she begs her friends to join the Sisters in their prayers for vocations and still more vocations, that none of the straying sheep may be lost.



## CONSCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

BEDE JARRETT, O.P.

**I**N guiding ourselves in the way of our Blessed Lord, we have to a certain extent to be left to our own conscience and we can't put on to the shoulders of any one else the decision. Obedience settles much in religion, but there must always be a margin over 'when?'. A number of things in the spiritual life are left to our own judgment, decision and prudence, details outside obedience, where authority may not or cannot enter. A vast region lies under our own rule. To guide this we have a faculty that goes by the name of conscience. It is not the voice of God, not like God whispering; it is a moral faculty. We have born in us the musical faculty. Now that is part of us, it can be trained well or ill, made to choose that which is best in music or less good; also the faculty of speech, we can speak well or ill, pronounce our words well or not. Just such a faculty is our conscience, the power of selecting what is good or what is ill. Though born with us, much depends on our education: you can teach a child almost anything you will. The human mind can be educated. Conscience is our moral faculty for telling moral right from wrong and it is infallible when properly trained. We cannot tell ourselves that we are right because our conscience allows us, we know from experience that our conscience can lose the power of judging truly. Our fingertips are sensitive, but if we burn them the skin hardens and they lose their sensitiveness. Sin has the same effect on our conscience. At one time our conscience would have been very clamorous over certain of our acts, now it is deadened, or the other way round. Some people

<sup>1</sup> From notes taken during a retreat to religious.

are much more severe after breakfast, especially on others, and so conscience varies with health, or goodness, or lack of goodness. *You are your conscience*, you have *made* it. You are responsible for your conscience. We make it what we like and must say not only 'does my conscience allow this' but '*ought* my conscience to allow it'. Protestants say 'do what you *think* is right and you *are* right'. So far it is true, but you must train your conscience not only from within but from without—the Church does this. There are some things we could never train our conscience to tell us correctly. Conscience requires to be trained by the Church. The sermon on the mount, the Gospels, are ways given by our Lord to train our conscience. A sensitive thing, a growing thing. Our conscience then lies at our own mercy and it is our business then to see, especially in retreat time, whether it is behaving as it should. It is a good thing to take the teaching of the Church, take the simple Catechism and read through it, not from the point of view of teaching but for our own instruction, from the point of view of learning.

In this matter there are two separate things to be considered. Firstly, the principles by which my conscience judges the commandments and doctrines of the Church. But I can't say if conscience is right because I have behind me the infallible Church. We think we told a lie, but *is* this a lie I am telling? It is wrong to lie, but was I lying? I know I have taken vows of Poverty, Chastity, Obedience, but *is* this against Obedience, or Poverty, or Chastity? Principles are not enough here. Human life is extraordinarily complex. Books and human guides we may consult, but they, those I ask, have to take my word for what I say. Though I accept the principle I must be thrown to a large extent on my own resources. My statement must be necessarily incomplete because of all sorts of things too intimate and intricate to describe. We have so often to make decisions on the spur of the moment. Am I right in not speaking or ought I to speak? Ought authority to know this? I must rely on my own judgment. Others whom we ask are naturally affected by the way in which we present the case. No two people see the same thing; we see it differently from different points of view. How then can I see in the delicate duty of deciding what to do? I must rely on my own judgment. Have I anything to help me to settle the delicate cases of conscience which I have to settle? Yes—and no. No, in a

sense for I must make my own judgment. In your vocation, for example, you *must* make your own decision, listen to advice, but at the judgment seat it will be no use to say 'Father so-and-so told me to enter'. God will say 'Who's he?' It is a personal process, and so important; if we have judged badly we shall be condemned, if rightly rewarded.

Secondly, I must judge according as it affects my whole life. In the realm of conscience by my own bare will I must decide—my own will? No—not entirely. I want to settle things as God wants me to, to get hold of God's particular view, to speak or be silent as he wants me to speak or be silent. What do I want, or think? What God wants or thinks of it? How am I to find out, to settle it? One way I shall settle it by the goodness of my life, that will affect my conscience, such good as there is in me or such evil. When we live with people and love them we instinctively know their views; if we live with God and try to do what he wants and are steadily obedient to others whom God has set over us, it would seem that we shall make good judgments.

So it will depend upon my general goodness. The needle points steadily to the north, your soul is steadily turned to God and if we try to quicken our love our judgment will be true to God. Lucifer was a perfectly ordered kingdom, obedient to the least breath of God. Then he fell, sin dominated his will and obscured his reason and the reason no longer obeyed the law of God. Our Lady was freed and her reason obeyed the law of God. The saints ended where our Lady began. We live in this bothered state; as St Paul says, 'I do not the good which I will; but the evil which I hate, that I do'. I long to love and serve God but I do not the things that I would. To get it back that our reason should respond to God's will is the *end of life*. Conscience judging truly. And so if we work as we *must* to keep our conscience right we must go back to the moral principles and on the application of principles depends my love and service of God. If I try to follow God's law I can take it for granted my conscience will be usually right. If I live carelessly God's will will neither be heard nor understood, nor carried out; we shall have a slipshod conscience. For us then this must be clear, that we can't say 'my conscience lets me'—should my conscience let me? We must rely on our conscience even in Religion. My conscience must follow from my general love of God. If we do our best we have a right to

God's help. Over and over again in guiding ourselves or giving advice to others we are probably wrong, giving out mischief all our lives. What a deal of evil we may be doing unintentionally. If our lives have not tried to be faithful our advice may be doing harm to souls who have trusted us. So God must help us, and God *will* help us as we are faithful and trust to God's inspirations. We shall be judged not only for our lives but for our conscience. Life is the result of conscience, conscience the result of life, round and round in a circle.

Remember, our conscience will judge truly according to the measure of our LOVE.



## REVIEWS

THE GOLDEN STRING. By Bede Griffiths, O.S.B. (The Harvill Press; 12s. 6d.)

'To follow up the vision which we have seen, to keep it in mind when we are thrown back again on the world, to live in its light and to shape our lives by its law . . .': this, for Dom Bede Griffiths, is to wind in William Blake's 'golden string' which 'will lead you in at heaven's gate built in Jerusalem's wall'. The vision (and it is, in no derogatory sense, a visionary's book) came first with the schoolboy's sudden initiation, on a lovely evening early in summer, to 'another world of beauty and mystery' to which man properly belongs. Drawn insistently on by this ancient beauty he was led away from the restless fictions and ugly output of modern life to God and to the Catholic faith and to monasticism at Prinknash Abbey. And the very account is written with a beauty and sensitiveness that reflect the constant ideal in the background.

His generation was bewildered and disillusioned, the post-war generation of the 20's. 'We did not belong anywhere. That was part of our misery; whether we liked it or not we were uprooted like the rest of the world, and wherever we went we could not escape ourselves.' All too many of that generation, finding, as they thought, in morality law without love, in religion conformity without deep inspiration, nourished themselves upon the light food of romanticism and politics, until both turned to wormwood in the 30's. Dom Bede instead, with the same starting point, plunged roots deep, first into the past (which he