THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE AS A SOURCE OF MORAL AUTHORITY

“What Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way...” St Paul’s letter to the Hebrews 13:18

What is the conscience?
The conscience is the inner feeling of the rightness or wrongness of an action. It is often described as a voice within us. The Church says that the conscience is the ‘voice of God within us’ that ‘calls us to love’. (CCC 1776) The conscience can act in advance of an action (guiding us on the best way to act) or after an action (helping us to feel guilt or satisfaction).

What is a source of moral authority?
It is something that can teach us how to live, and guide us when making moral decisions.

Why is the conscience a good source of moral authority?

- It is believed that the conscience comes straight from God (not like the Bible or Catechism which have been interpreted and written by people) – so we should follow it.
- It is always with you, and everyone has one (unlike a copy of the catechism or Bible)
- Famous saints such as Augustine, Paul and Thomas Aquinas all agreed that the conscience had authority and as such should be listened to.
- Blessed John Henry Newman once said “I toast the Pope, but I toast the conscience first” and called the conscience the “aboriginal vicar of Christ”. This means that he saw conscience as the most important factor in making moral decisions – even more important than church teaching and the Pope.
- Pope Benedict XVIIth said that an ‘informed conscience’ is the best tool for moral decision making. We inform our consciences by referring to Bible and church teaching, so it is a comprehensive source of authority.
- The CCC says “A human being must always obey the certain judgement of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself.” (CCC 1790)

Why might some people reject the authority of the conscience?

- Some people have been mistaken about the voice of their ‘conscience’ – the Yorkshire Ripper (Peter Sutcliffe) claimed that his conscience/God had told him to murder prostitutes. It was later revealed that the ‘voice of his conscience/God’ was actually mental illness.
- If everyone simply followed their consciences instead of recognised sources of authority, the world could descend into chaos.
- The conscience might lead people to commit immoral actions (such as abortions or euthanasia) – following the church teaching means there is little chance of committing an immoral act.
- The conscience might clash with Bible teachings or Church teachings – how can we be sure we are doing the right thing if that is the case?
- Following Church or Bible teachings keep the community together so that everybody is following the same rules – it unites followers. The conscience does not.