

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 44

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To grasp truth requires an uplifted mind and an unclouded heart. In normal times, our emotional attachment to religious doctrine, forms, and practices assists us in our faith journey, enabling us to persevere over the long course of spiritual growth. In the Last Days, that same emotional attachment, once so helpful, may cloud our heart and become the greatest obstacle to a believer grasping the new truth when encountering it. Thus, the most zealous of the faithful, like Saul of Tarsus, need the greatest shock to unsettle their certainties, open their minds, and soften their hearts. In writing my letter to Bishop Vasa, I had hoped to achieve an opening for continuing conversation by reasoned suasion. It quickly became clear, a more dramatic, apocalyptic shock would be needed.

Bishop Vasa responded to me by sending a packet of encyclicals and a short letter that appeared cobbled together from other correspondence. I thought, at least this is a start.

On the other hand, the superintendent, John Collins, angrily confronted me and demanded to know what made me think I could write to the bishop in such a fashion. He intimated that

my job was on the line and from his tone, I could tell that he really wanted me gone. We had hired the new school president, Laura Held, and my first official meeting with her followed directly on the heels of my encounter with Collins. Her response was equally indignant, though less emotional than his. Held informed me that I had violated Newman protocol by addressing the owner of the school directly, rather than through proper channels of communication. I was never again to write such a letter. The not so subtle implication was that my job was at risk. I thanked her, and avoided a confrontation by apologizing to her for any embarrassment I might have caused the school. I knew in my heart of hearts, there was going to be another letter.

My letter circulated among the faculty, parents, and alumni. Parents then shared it with their students. With the exception of the professional religious, its reception was universally positive. I realized once again the power of the Divine Principle, for my letter was nothing more than an attempt to introduce Divine Principle themes in Catholic linguistic clothing. I hoped that I could raise questions in the bishop's mind that he would want to follow up on in conversation. I sought nothing less than fruitful dialogue. Though I did not find it with the bishop or superintendent, I did with everyone else. Students would approach me after class and tell me something like, "my family read your letter to the bishop last night at dinner and then we talked about it." Parents would write or call to thank me. The effect was galvanizing.

At the end of each school year, Cardinal Newman holds a poetry and art fair to provide a forum for student expression and highlight their creativity. The controversy over the contract addendum had not escaped the attention of our young men and women. And as mentioned above, my letter was widely circulating. The administration's threatening response to it had the effect of elevating my reputation and theological positions in the community. During the course of the art exhibit, as a form of protest art, one of our students researched the writings of Pope Francis, John Henry Newman, Augustine, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others to mine quotes about the moral centrality of love, conscience, and freedom of expression. During the night, he surreptitiously chalked the quotes on all of the walkways and walls around the school. The president and chaplain were apoplectic. Rather than appreciate the work of the young man, they wanted him expelled for committing an act of vandalism. They called the superintendent to come over to the property and survey the "damage" caused by this young vandal.

Not yet aware of the furor this art had unleashed, I had taken my class, notepads in hand, on a tour of all the various quotes. They were to record them, find their favorite, and write an essay on the significance of the quote in our times and community. I saw the "writing on the wall" as a teaching moment. As luck

(fate? Providence?) would have it, my students stood circled around a Pope Francis quote counseling tolerance while I spoke to them, when the enraged chaplain and superintendent rudely cut through the middle of my circled students, glared and kept walking. About five yards off he stopped, and barely able to speak, motioned for me to approach him. I excused myself from the class and went to him.

He asked what I was doing, though it was perfectly obvious. I related my assignment. He responded that I was "glorifying an act of vandalism!" I said no, this was a "teaching moment." He then questioned my judgment as a teacher, and suggested that this lapse may cost my job. Collins left in a huff. Of course, the students witnessed this exchange, texted all their friends, and by the time word got back to the parents, my job was safe for a millennium.

Fortunately, the administration could never positively identify the student-artist. Though many on the faculty knew who he was (as did most of the students), we kept silent and protected him.

The following spring, the faculty catechetical presentation addressed the matter of the individual conscience. Having heard True Father speak on this subject for years, I couldn't help but to be excited by the prospect of the bishop's interpretation. Almost certainly, he would give me material for another letter.

And so he did. Rather than focus on the capacity of the individual person to grow as the son or daughter of God, Bishop Vasa emphasized the role of Church teaching in shaping and educating the individual conscience. There was no discussion of human agency and the centrality of conscience in our calling to love. The tone was defensive and ignored the John Henry Newman writings on the primacy of conscience. Moreover, the talk did not allow room at the conclusion for questions. A perfect opening for another letter! My hope was to provide a forceful enough shock to stimulate real dialogue.

Below is the text of my second letter to Bishop Vasa.

Dear Bishop Vasa,

Thank you very much for our continuing lecture series. The topics addressed have stimulated conversation among our faculty, highlighted important issues in our life of faith, and encouraged personal growth and conversion of heart. The recent presentation on conscience was not an exception.

I could not agree more that the role of conscience in any given situation is to draw our actions into harmony with God's heart and desire. When I look to scripture for an example of this dynamic, I am drawn to the encounter of Jesus with the "teachers of religious law and the Pharisees" seeking to stone the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11). The law as written in Leviticus is stark and insistent: those committing adultery "shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10). As guardians of Jewish law and tradition, naturally, Israel's institutional priesthood felt compelled to enforce the law as written. Yet, it proved to be this very insistence on the letter of the law which became an obstacle for the priesthood. The response of Jesus to the guardians of tradition in this encounter ought to define our conception of the relationship between law and conscience. Jesus tells the crowd, "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:8). Jesus makes no argument but appeals to the individual conscience of each person standing ready to cast stones. In a few words, Jesus undercuts the absolute authority of the institutional priesthood and places the individual conscience in the position to weigh the commands of the law. Jesus does not explicitly discount the law, nor does he dismiss the moral guardians of Israel, he simply guides them to engage the letter of the law with their consciences to determine the appropriate action in a given circumstance.

Moreover, at the close of the encounter, Jesus declines to condemn the adulterous woman, simply telling her to "go away, and don't sin anymore." In refusing to judge, Jesus instead assumes the position of a teacher--a forgiving and instructive role--guiding the unfortunate woman on the path to a spiritual life by appealing to her conscience. Thus, through the example of Jesus, a singular and significant metaphorical shift occurs: from conscience as judge to conscience as teacher. This metaphorical shift brings us closer to a Christian anthropology and the truth of the human person. Thus, if we are called to be the daughters and sons of the God who is love, then our conscience exists as an agent of that love, to teach us the way in which we should live in order to realize God's purpose in creating us. Fidelity to our conscience allows our original natures to unfold without the distortion of selfishness, enabling us to love as God loves.

Understanding the conscience as teacher as opposed to judge, is more consistent with the overall teaching of Jesus. With the Gospel, the intellectual and spiritual path evolves from a rule or law based way to the more internal path of the heart. As Paul makes clear, repeatedly, the law cannot bring us life, nor does the law save us (e.g., Rom. 7:5-6). This shift advances the providential development of a path that increasingly conceives of spiritual maturity not as the capacity to obey a set of laws external to the self, but as an internal path of personal responsibility to embody the heart and love of God, by responding to the internal instructions of the individual conscience (Galatians 5:1).

The absolute centrality of this shift in the gospels, can be seen as the disciples respond to the call of Jesus to "follow me!" To follow Jesus, the disciples had to believe the unbelievable and oppose the orthodoxy of their age. The obstacles to belief in Jesus as the Messiah were enormous.

To this day, based on Malachi 4:5-6, Jewish tradition anticipates the return of Elijah as the necessary precondition for the advent of the Messiah: "Know that I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before my day comes, that great and terrible day. He shall turn the hearts of fathers towards their children and the hearts of children towards their fathers...". Thus, the legitimacy of the claim of Jesus to his anointing as the Messiah, was contingent upon the appearance of Elijah. Because we have come to accept Jesus as the Christ, it is not difficult for us in this age, to recognize in John the Baptist, a person chosen by God to fulfill the mission of Elijah, to prepare the way for the Lord. After all, we have the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 11:14 "...and he [John], if you will believe me, is the Elijah who was to return."

However, in the first century, it was not so easy to recognize that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, to fill the role of Elijah. The primary obstacle to accepting John as Elijah, arose from the Baptist himself: he neither saw nor proclaimed himself as Elijah. On the contrary, we read in the opening chapter of John's gospel: "This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him 'Who are you?' he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, 'I am not the Christ.' 'Well then,' they asked 'are you Elijah?' 'I am not,' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.'" (John 1:19-21). Thus John stated unequivocally that he was not Elijah, while Jesus asserted just as forcefully that John was Elijah (Matt. 17:10-13).

Who were the people to believe? John himself or another? Who in fact was more believable? John was the son of the High Priest Zechariah, the descendant of a well known and respected line of Levites. Jesus on the other hand, from a social viewpoint, was an illegitimate child raised in a working class family. The historical outcome is undisputed: Jesus was not accepted as the Christ but crucified as a poseur and blasphemer.

So the question before us is, how could the disciples follow Jesus? To do so, they had to go against the Law, the Prophets, the Priesthood, and the orthodoxy of their age. They had to ignore the social stigma that attached to them as they moved to the margins of their society and religion. How could they do this? Each of them could only follow Jesus by following his or her individual conscience. Christ's call required this of them: they had to recognize their individual conscience as an authority greater than the Law, the Prophets, the Priesthood, and the orthodox teachings of their age.

At this point, one might object that, of course Jesus is the Christ, the Word of God and the source of the Law and the Prophets, therefore, the disciples were not in fact placing their consciences above the Law and Prophets but only truly seeing and understanding them through the words of Jesus. But this objection only begs the question: once again, to know the truth in this moment required the engagement of the individual conscience in an act of subjective discernment.

Why is this important? It strikes at the heart of our understanding of the human person. The very constitution of our natures requires us to be individually responsible. There can be no growth, no accountability, no love, and no redemption without individual responsibility. The individual human person is always in the position to decide and that responsibility can never be honestly ceded to any authority, individual or corporate, ecclesial or secular, no matter the claim being made. Why is this? Each individual is responsible for the realization of his or her own nature or personhood. And the consequences of our actions are what, in the end, we truly own.

Finally, the providence of God is never static but continues to unfold from moment to moment. When Christ appeared, he did not come as expected. The words he spoke conflicted with the orthodox wisdom of his age. The people of the age expected a great sign but had none. They had to weigh the words and actions of Jesus in their hearts, engage their consciences, and decide. To have played it "safe" by following religious authority was, from the Roman Catholic vantage, to earn the approbation of history.

Thus, as the providence unfolds, we are mandated by heaven and our very natures, to engage each moment with our consciences, for "[w]hen the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). We cannot assume that our religious leaders will correctly lead us: it is incumbent upon each individual to weigh ecclesial words and directions in his or her own conscience. After all, the consequence is eternal and in the end, it is all we truly own.

Thank you again for stimulating my thoughts and for your patient reading of my response.

Your Brother in Christ,
J. Scharfen