



PASTORS TO PASTORS

Volume 8 Number 2 Fall 2001

CONSCIENCE

by Father Alexander Garklavs

Conscience is the pivot of spiritual life, where God's grace and man's faith is balanced and a person's thoughts and actions are regulated. Like the soul, the heart and consciousness (which is not identical to conscience), conscience is an essential part of a person's whole being. Conscience is for the soul what consciousness is for the body. The loss of consciousness usually corresponds with the end of a person's life, while the total loss of conscience signals the "death" of a soul, that is, a soul's disconnection from God. When the latter occurs, a person's soul is not only separated from God, but is also alienated from humanity. This can happen in a rather insignificant and momentary way, as it does for most people virtually all the time. The loss of conscience can also be deliberately and assiduously cultivated, by an individual or community, producing people and cultures which are completely blind to God and to the goodness of God in creation. There are now, there have been and always will be, lovers of self, proud, arrogant, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it" (2 Tm. 3.5). Why is that? How is it that into the world come both St. Seraphim of Sarov and Adolph Hitler? Why are some born to be saints and others to be killers? The workings of the conscience are sacred and mysterious, ennobling and damning.

There are different opinions about the nature of life for Adam and Eve, but we can say with certainty that they both possessed a conscience. This is a dimension of life that all human

beings have by virtue of being in God's image. Conscience is one of God's great gifts to mankind, like freedom which is linked to it. Without freedom, if man did not have the opportunity to choose right from wrong, conscience would be irrelevant. Yet freedom, in the sense of freedom from sin and passions, is only achievable through the conscience. "Let us stand firm in the fear of God, practicing virtue and not giving our conscience cause to stumble. In the fear of God let us keep our attention fixed within ourselves, until our conscience achieves its freedom. When there is a union between a conscience and a person it will be a holy guardian. If we do not obey our conscience, it will abandon us and we shall fall into an evil state" (St. Isaac the Solitary).

Although the conscience is universal, it is also always unique and personal with every individual, adapting one's behavior to the particular circumstances of place and time. A man thinks, comprehends, acts and speaks as his conscience dictates. Everyone has a conscience, even non-believers' consciences can "accuse or excuse" them (Rom. 2.15).

However, the pure conscience is a state of grace, achieved by a person's faith and good works. A pure conscience makes possible the acquisition of the Holy Spirit and the nurturing of spiritual gifts. During the Divine Liturgy we pray to be made worthy "to partake of the heavenly and awesome Mysteries of this sacred and spiritual table with a *pure* conscience, for remission of sins, for the communion of the Holy Spirit, for inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven."

Because of our God-given freedom, we can always manage to corrupt, negate or even destroy the conscience. Fortunately, it can be restored. At the Cherubic Hymn the priest prays that God cleanse his heart and soul from an "evil conscience." Through prayer the conscience can be renewed, and also by the remembrance of God, by the remembrance of death and in other ways, with no personal initiative. Such was the case with St. Peter when the cock crowed and with St. Mary of Egypt when she tried to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. When thus activated, the conscience is our means

Seminarian Internship Program Completes Second Year

During the summer of 2001, eight OCA seminarians were placed in as many parishes in what was the second year of the Seminarian Internship Program (SIP). Created as a "Church Wide Initiative" at the 1999 All-American Council in Pittsburgh, the SIP has received high marks from both the seminarians and clergy-mentors who have participated. Common themes, as presented in the evaluations, express fulfillment, inspiration, enrichment, learning and affirmation of the dignity and greatness of the priesthood. Another sentiment that was shared by the seminarian interns in particular was the sincere gratitude they wanted to express to the OCA for making it possible for them to experience such a program.

As specified in the original proposal, the SIP has been budgeted for a three year period. The SIP Committee is actively engaged in urging seminarians and parishes to apply for the 2002 summer. Pastors, and parishes, that are interested in hosting a seminarian intern have received a letter of notification with an application. These applications should be sent, and questions can be addressed, to: ***Seminarian Internship Program, Orthodox Church in America, PO Box 675, Syosset, NY 11791.*** □

of communion with God. St. Theophan the Recluse said that the conscience is "deeper in the soul than the heart" where man truly senses the fear of God. The philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev wrote some remarkable things about the conscience: "The conscience is that depth of human nature where man encounters God, hears His voice and obtains His commandments. The conscience is the remembrance, in our sinful life, of God and God-like life. It is the conscience which recognizes divine revelation, truth, righteousness, the whole and integrated life. Through the conscience man comes to know himself, his world, his creator and what he was created for."

The Christian understanding about conscience comes from the profound insights in the Pauline epistles. Through the sacrificial and redeeming death of Jesus Christ, a corrupt conscience can be purified "from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb. 9.13). Pastoral love is the "aim of our charge" which comes from a "pure heart and good conscience and sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1.5). When conscience is rejected "certain persons made shipwreck of their faith" (1 Tim. 1.19). Without a good conscience, neither true faith nor adequate ministry is possible. Conscience is

never just a private or personal matter, "for we are members one of another" (Eph. 4.25). Conscience is how an individual's life plays out in the context of other lives. St. Paul says that he refuses underhanded and cunning ways of preaching, but "by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4.2). Every person's conscience is in the sight of God, but what is also true is that there is a divine element in the collective conscience of humanity. By means of the personal and collective consciences, human beings interact with each other, not as animals or in abusive ways, but with respect and kindness. In all that is honorable and decent, human relationship is sustained by conscience. By means of a good conscience we "act honorably in all things" (Heb. 13.18). This means being respectful of other people's consciences. Offending somebody else's conscience, even in a remote possibility, is to be avoided. "Wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ" (1 Cor. 8.12).

Thomas Merton elaborated on this theme in a short essay called "Prayer and Conscience." He states that conscience is very close to our identity and that it "has a great deal to do with the presence of God." However that identity of self, and the presence of God, can never come about in isolation. "We don't really find out who we are until we find ourselves in Christ and in relation to other people. We are not individuals, we are persons, and a person is defined by a relationship with others. Thus the Christian conscience is not just an individual conscience with Christian traffic laws, but it is a kind of collective conscience." Merton credits the Russian Orthodox concept of *sobornost* as the source for his thoughts. Orthodox theologians "have always had this idea of the Church as a real communion of souls and thought and consciousness" and consequently what is stressed is the "idea of person as being more than the individual, as being in fact that which is drawn out of us when we are in contact with others in Christ, that

which is drawn out of us in communion."

Recent events, that have challenged our nation, and the world, can be understood in terms of conscience. Terrorist acts are the result of abnormal or non-existent consciences. In general, fanaticism is a psychological deviation that is characterized by a complete lack of conscience. Paradoxically, fanaticism is often expressed under the guise of religious zeal. Nothing can be further from the truth. Jesus and His apostles were known for their zeal, but they were never fanatics. The distinction is crucial. A zealous pastor is commendable, a fanatic is dangerous. The confusion of the two has resulted in numerous historical episodes that have done great harm to religion in general and Christianity in particular, e.g. the Crusades, Inquisition, capital punishment for heretics, forced conversions, etc.

However the existence of fanaticism is not a product of spontaneous generation. Often enough, the fanatic is one whose conscience has been painfully wounded. In other words, while perpetrators of evil are certainly responsible for their unconscionable actions, victims cannot always claim complete innocence of the cause of evil. Fanaticism and terrorism are products of complex factors. Living in harsh and difficult circumstances, deprived of basic needs and services, but seeing others indulge in irresponsible hedonism, vulgar licentiousness, and arrogant chauvinism, a person's conscience can be drastically affected. As we noted, the Christian concept of conscience takes into account not only one's personal state, but the condition of others as well. We work to keep our own conscience pure and with equal determination to keep pure the consciences of other people. A Christian can never say, "My conscience is clear," when an activity that he is engaged in or condones may have caused damage to the conscience of another person.

The pastor's task is sometimes described as "care for people's souls."

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Department of
Pastoral Life and Ministry
Orthodox Church in America
PO Box 675, Syosset NY 11791

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"Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

Fr Paul Suda

Dean, St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Allison Park, Pennsylvania

Q. Fr. Paul, how many years have you been a priest and how have you seen the role of the Orthodox pastor change during this time?

A. In December, 2001 I will celebrate my thirty-sixth year of ordination. I have been pastor of St. Alexander Nevsky parish since the Fall of 1969.

During the past thirty-five years there have been radical changes in our society. When society changes, it is obvious that our parishioners, who are members of that society, also change. If I approached the community entrusted to my care in 2001 in the same way that I did in 1969, I would last about a month. Parishioners today are different. They are more sophisticated, we have converts who have embraced the faith with considerable knowledge, also parish councils have mellowed. The old Clint Eastwood approach, "Go ahead, make my day," whether played by the council president or parish priest is irrelevant. Time, or the lack of it, is another factor in our society. Long services and half-hour sermons don't work like they used to. Besides, more is not synonymous with better. As priests, we are called to work out our salvation together with our parishioners. We must deal with our people where they are, not where we want them to be, and then take them on that journey.

Q. What people influenced your desire to become a priest?

A. For as long as I can remember, my parents, sisters and I always prayed and worshipped. I grew up in Coaldale, Pennsylvania and my parish was considered a large one, by American Orthodox standards. I believe that my wife, Mary, was the greatest influence. When I enrolled at St. Tikhon's Seminary, as a married student, she was willing to make the sacrifices. Those were difficult years. Our income was cut in half. Our eldest daughter was born during my seminary training. In fact, when I enrolled, I was not so sure that this was where God was calling me; I made sure I left my previous job on good terms just in

case I wanted to return. My father-in-law, Nicholas Timko of blessed memory, was also influential. He was a man of God and a great example. His two sons, Nicholas and Theodore, are Orthodox priests, and my wife's sister, Anna, is married to Fr. John Voytilla. My wife also has four cousins who are priests.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention my parish priest, Fr. Dimitri Ressetar. He was a great role model: loving, compassionate and gentle. He faithfully served his parish community, regardless of how the community treated him, always responding with love. He never allowed the shortcomings of the community to tarnish his love for God and His holy Church.

Finally, Fr. Michael Romanchak, pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Catasauqua, Pennsylvania, gave guidance and inspiration while my wife and I worshipped there, prior to my entering seminary. I know of no priest today who made the sacrifices he and his family made for the community entrusted to his care.

Q. In your opinion, what pastoral issues should young priests be most concerned about?

A. This is a tough question. Our seminaries are producing well-educated men for the priesthood. Their understanding about the teachings of the Church is more than satisfactory and they preach well. A weak area is managerial skills, which is difficult to teach. The TV show "Who's the Boss?" comes to mind. Internal struggles for control can paralyze a parish community. These struggles in turn mean that there is no peace and when there is no peace there can be no spiritual growth.

I believe that many of our younger priests, and sometimes even the older ones, have difficulty in assessing what is truly important; and they lack patience. We are not only priests, we are pastors. I believe it is easier for some clergy to be priests than to be pastors. A priest's position is secure because of canon law

and rules. There are times, however, when sensitivity to pastoral needs should set the law aside. These aspects are not really separate, but we are both priest and pastor, and too many clergy are more concerned with rules at the expense of pastoral activity. Sometimes rules, such as standing, kneeling, sitting, pews, no pews, etc., become controversial issues even before the parish community gets to know the priest and his family.

The best advice I can give younger clergy would be to repeat the words of Our Lord when He asked St. Peter, "Do you love Me? Feed my sheep" (John 21). We feed His sheep by visiting the sick and shut-ins. We feed His sheep by giving our very *best* effort every Sunday, proclaiming God's word at the Divine Liturgy. We feed His sheep when we see the image and likeness of God in *all* our parishioners. I once read that before you lead people you have to love them. People do not care how much you know until they know that you care. Our parishioners must know that we love them. In this our faults and weaknesses diminish in their eyes, because love overcomes our shortcomings. I love the parishioners entrusted by my care, and not just those who love me, for that is easy. We are called to love those who do not love us, and by our example their opinion about us will change, for love conquers all.

I recommend to all priests, young and old alike, to read or re-read *The Orthodox Pastor* written by Archbishop John (Shahovskoy). His pastoral insight will benefit all of us. I think priests should read this book every year to avoid becoming lazy and indifferent. I also highly recommend that you dust off your *Guidelines for Clergy*, compiled under the guidance of the Holy Synod of the OCA. It is a very balanced document and provides great pastoral guidance.

Under no circumstances do I want any of my brother clergy to think that my pastoral ministry is better than theirs. Being a pastor is not a competitive sport.

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(Conscience, continued)

More appropriate would be "care for people's consciences." The conscience is the area of the soul that receives instruction, that chooses to obey God's will, that feels uncomfortably guilty when wrong has been done, that chooses to repent of sins. In general, the conscience is the "bull's eye" area of the soul that the pastor aims to affect. Preaching and teaching about the conscience itself is a start because most people take it for granted. Regular participation in the sacrament of Confession is one way to nurture a healthy conscience. Another is to encourage charity for *all* needy people. Teaching sensitivity to the poor, sick and beyond sympathy to the point of empathy, is an essential task of the Orthodox priest.

Naturally, the pastor needs to take care of his own conscience. He needs to keep his conscience pure, through regular prayer, pastoral activity, self-control and frequent Confession. "Before beginning any work," St. Tikhon of Zadonsk wrote, "ask yourself, 'Is this going to be agreeable to your conscience and to the will of God?'" The pastor's thoughts, words and deeds should all be governed by a conscience which is attuned to his awesome vocation as minister and preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his relationship with people, both parishioners as well as those outside the parish, the pastor must be on guard to be above reproach and hint of scandal. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a

workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2.15). To this end, a fundamental ingredient for pastoral work is humility. While humility may be an absent quality in other professions, it is a prerequisite for pastors. "Humble yourself inwardly before everybody, counting yourself

(Fr Paul Suda, continued)

My goal is simply to give my best effort to the parishioners entrusted to my care each and every day. It is what they expect, and it is what Our Lord Jesus Christ asks of me.

Q. Are we, as the Orthodox Church in America, sufficiently attentive to the life and needs of our parishes and our parish priests?

A. Personally, I believe that while much progress has occurred, much more work needs to be done. We still have, in isolated areas, church councils treating priests as hirelings. We have priests making decrees that begin with "Thus says the Lord." We have parishes so small that mergers are needed, but nothing is being done to bring about implementation. Priests assigned to these small parishes can barely survive financially, and have too much time on their hands. But who should address these issues? The Central Church? The Diocese? We are a hierarchical church with limited hierarchical authority, and I realize that our bishops are *in* the church and not *above* it.

As clergy, we are never supervised. We have priests who do not preach at all during the summer months. Priests in some parishes have not received increases in their compensation for years. Other priests have difficulty

lower than all, for you are called by Christ to be the servant of all, and all are his members although like you they bear the wounds of sin" (St. John of Kronstadt). Achieving real humility with some consistency will keep the pastor's conscience pure and this, in turn, will produce an effective and worthy ministry. □

administering their parishes and, when problems arise, the solution is to transfer the priest only to have problems surface again in the next community. Or the parish just vacated is never disciplined and remains a difficult and troubled community. We have parishes that refuse to pay the expenses of sending their priest to the All-American Council. We should also be troubled by the number of suspended and deposed clergy among our ranks and ask our intervention could have been one.

We have made great strides and the new pastoral assistance program is one example of support that priests and their families can take advantage of, but many clergy fail to accept the help that is offered to them. It is also true that diocesan bishops respond differently to the problems presented to them, and rightly so. I realize that there are no simple solutions to any of my perceptions of the above-mentioned problems, prayer is important but prayer alone will not make them go away. Perhaps we will never be problem-free.

We are, after all, followers of the Cross and we expect some suffering for a little while, knowing that the

"God of all grace who has called us to His eternal glory in Christ, will restore, establish and strengthen us" (1 Peter 5.10). □

PASTORS TO PASTORS is published by the OCA Department of Pastoral Life and Ministry, PO Box 675, Syosset NY 11791, and is distributed to all hierarchs, parish and institutional clergy, military chaplains, and monastic clergy, active and retired, on the rolls of the Orthodox Church in America, and to OCA seminarians.

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