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The Function of Moral Conscience in Patristic Theology

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Abstract

The teachings of the Fathers with regard to conscience are based on Scripture, especially on Saint Paul, the Apostle’s thinking as well as on their own spiritual experience; it is a product of their saintly life, in accordance with the reason and the word of God. Biblical conscience is a Theo-centric experience who gives man faith in order to achieve throughout history His salvation plan and who calls him to a personal response is to be heard. For the Eastern Fathers, the approach of the theme of moral conscience has a rather theological and practical character than a psychological one. The Fathers have been involved in this analysis of conscience having an essentially pastoral role, trying foremost to guide Christians to the practice of Christian life. Gradually, moral conscience within Patristic is personalized in such a manner that it becomes a proper attribute of the person.

Keywords

moral life, Church Fathers, moral responsibility, spirituality, anthropology.

I. Introduction

Biblical conscience is a Theo-centric experience; in it, the voice of a Personal God who gives man faith in order to achieve throughout history

His salvation plan and who calls him to a personal response is to be heard.

The stoic idea of conscience, considered as a participation in the impersonal harmony of the cosmos, remains distant and contrasts with the biblical Revelation. The cold Hellenistic theories, although apparently very harmonious, are totally lacking the Theo-centric dynamism of Jewish prophecy, thing enthusiastically underlined by Bergson¹. The fundamental religious notion of moral biblical conscience highlights the extrinsic character of initial morals. Nothing is more foreign to Old Testament mentalities than “Know thyself”. Let us recall that the founding principle of Jewish morals is the adherence to the will of God. In the midst of this religious vision, the psychological analysis of humane faculties and corresponding acts has a relative importance². For this reason, Judaism constantly assumes the risk of falling in extrinsic legalism. From the very first books of the Bible we see this extrinsic moral to appear; but conscience is the theme in the drama of Paradise and it is surely a personal conscience. It is not the interior voice of Adam and Eve that resounds in our ears, but the voice of God. It is not Adam who accuses himself, but God is who accuses him externally (Genesis 3, 8-13). The consequence of the externalization of moral conscience, as presented in the book of Genesis, is its inclination of becoming collective (Genesis 6, 1-5; 11, 3-4). The tendency of depersonalizing morals will inevitably make room for external legalism which persists in the history of Judaism. It appears that in this external legalism the complex case-law of rabbis was developed, as it has the law as sole value and for which humane values such as personal reflection or goodwill or bad faith play no importance. In respect of the foregoing, from the beginning we identify a reaction that pleads for moral interiorization. The phenomenon of progressive internalization allows the voice of conscience to gradually approach God. Thanks to

¹ H. BERGSON, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2008, p. 257. For a comparative study on the Greek-Roman moral conscience and that of the Bible, please see DRUBBLE, “Le conflit entre sagesse religieuse et la sagesse profane”, in: *Biblica*, 17 (1936), p. 85 and 402; Ph. DELHAYE, “Les bases bibliques du traité de la conscience”, in: *Studia Montis Regis* 4 (1961), pp. 229-252.

² This explains the imprecise forms of the psychological vocabulary of the Old Testament. C. Spicq has shown that the notion of moral conscience was almost never used in the Old Testament because there exist no word to express it (“Le Conscience dans le Nouveau Testament”, in: *Revue Biblique*, 47 (1938), p. 50, note 1). As regards the Greek word *syneidesis* this does not appear until late in the Book of Wisdom (17, 10), in the sense of conscience.

the prophets, morals gain a dimension of opening the humane fora: they place morals on the side of righteous intention and let it reach again to the roots of conscience. Michas underlines the novel prophetic intention. More than exterior deeds, this is what God wants: justice, says Amos; love says Hosea,; faith says Isaiah; conversion of the heart says Jeremiah. The prophets strongly condemn sin and, undoubtedly, the picture is blackened when they describe the moral situation of their contemporaries. Jeremiah says (24, 7; 32, 29) that God will grant the Hebrews a new heart (Ezekiel, 36, 26). Moreover, it is not sufficient to honor God with our lips, but we must do so, honor Him, with the depths of our soul³.

The progressive internalization of moral conscience begun in the Old Testament grows to being plenary in the New Testament. In order to have a precise idea of the importance that the internalization of conscience acquires through the Savior's message, we must understand this message as an powerful reaction to Pharisaism and against the formal concept of law⁴. A. Marc⁵ has correctly remarked that Christianity has revealed the interior value of deed in itself, which precedes the exterior deed and grants upon it its entire moral value. In Christianity, justice – which is accomplished in the material abiding by a law – is not inconceivable, because the true founding of morals is in the root planted in the heart of man. Thus, conscience is formed in the depths of man, is polarized near an internal and immanent law, which keeps in the same time a strong connection with the personal God. The essence of Christianity is not its morals and its social teachings, but the very person of Christ which breaks ground for a new ontology. The ontological ground of Christian morals resides in the Embodiment and is revealed in the Resurrection. Christian morals and spirituality and in last resort applied ontology⁶. The Pauline moral conscience is in fact a live and stable force, a sort of interior power in communion with God, which controls human behavior in man's

³ Cf. A. ROBERT and A. FEUILLET, *Introduction a la Bible*, vol. I, Deslee & Cie, Paris, 1957, pp. 22-98; Th. MAERTENS, "L'Education du sens morale dans l'Ancient Testament", in: *Lumiere et Vie*, 1953. Certain words like "heart", "soul", "wisdom", entail in the course of the Old Testament several elements that today comprise the idea of moral conscience (cf. Ph. DELAYE, *La conscience morale du chrétienne*, Desclée, Paris-Tournai, 1964, pp. 33-50).

⁴ Cf. J. MOURoux, *L'expérience chrétienne. Introduction à une théologie*, Cerf, Paris, 1949, pp. 97-101.

⁵ Cf. A. MARC, *Dialectique de l'agir*, Vitte, Paris, 1949; R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Le Mesaje moral du Nouveau Testament*, Editions Xavier Mappus, Paris, 1964.

⁶ Γεώργιος ΜΑΝΤΖΑΡΙΑΔΗΣ, *Χριστιανική Ηθική*, vol. I, Πουρναράς, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2004, pp. 133, 137.

relationship with God. For pagans, conscience formulates the basics of a natural law, which is considered compulsory and guiding (I Corinthians 10, 28-29; II Cor. 4, 2; Romans 2, 15). For Christians, conscience acts in the same manner, only not originating from natural law as in the case of pagans, but in the Law of the Spirit (II Corinthians 1, 12; Acts 23, 1; 24, 16). The Holy Spirit introduces a supplementary testimony of truth to Christian conscience. The great Apostle speaks of a testimony of the Holy Spirit in conscience (Romans 9, 1).

The opinion that refers to conscience and all moral capabilities of the souls as being completely thought and made conditional by society is considered to be false by Orthodox theology and is contradicted by Orthodox anthropology which understands man as having been created in resemblance to the image of God.

A part of this image made up by the capacity of distinguishing good from evil. It pertains to that *donatum humanae* through which we think, judge or act in moral categories⁷. “When God made man – says Avva Dorotheus – He planted in him a godly seed in the liking of a thought (*osper loghismon*), more vivid and more luminous than a spark, in order for it to enlighten the mind and make it distinguish between good and evil, It is what is called conscience, which is the natural law”⁸. From an ontological perspective, we all possess a *donatum* having determining dimensions for our thinking and decision-making capacities⁹. The ontological and dynamical character of Orthodox anthropology is present both in the case of the general assessment of humane capabilities, as well as in the case of the individual assessment of conscience.

“The unique character of our senses and conceptions, as writes Vasileios Antoniadès, has as cause the unique nature of the soul, which in its turn possesses as ability and essential capacity to respond with an internal, individual condition, similar to external factors, when the latter stimulate our senses”¹⁰.

⁷ Cf. Stanley Samuel HAKAKAS, *Toward Transfigured Life*, Light and Life Publishing, Minnesota, 1983, p. 108.

⁸ St. DOROTHEE DE GAZA, *Instructions*, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 92, Jacques de Preville (ed.), Picardy, 1963, p. 209.

⁹ Human capabilities are understood neither minimal – as if they had no practical importance, nor maximal, as if they had an exclusive power of determination. From this perspective, the Roman-Catholic tradition is maximalist, while the Protestant one is essentially minimalist.

¹⁰ Vasileios ANTONIADES, *Encheiridion Kata Christon Etikes*, vol. I, Fazilet Press, Constantinopol, 1934, p. 16.

The moral dimension of the image of God in man is seen more clear in three expressions of this *donatum humanae* of moral existence: liberty, moral rules and conscience itself. The original liaison of man therewith, with moral potential capabilities, is evidenced in many patristic quotes.

“In the beginning, as written by St. Gregory of Nyssa, God made man with the capacity of reason, of choosing the truth and of fulfilling justice, so as all men be without word of self-righteousness before God for they have been created as rational and contemplative beings”¹¹.

Taking a starting point the biblical revelation¹² and especially the testimony of St. Paul the Apostle, the Holy Fathers try to permanently fathom the concept of moral conscience. In this sense, they often get to use philosophic categories, the majority of which are taken from stoicism (the concept of *logos*) or from Neo-Platonism. Generally speaking, their search has a rather practical than psychological theological character. The Fathers were involved in this analysis of conscience with an essentially pastoral purpose, trying before anything else to guide the faithful into practicing the Christian life.

Gradually, moral conscience within Patristics is so personalized that at one point it becomes an intrinsic characteristic of the person. In fact, conscience is a tutor: it warns, censors, punishes and reprimands constantly. It expresses itself like a real person: achieves a personal dialogue with the individual at stake, or plays, at the same time, the role of “me” and that of “you”.

¹¹ S.P.N. GREGORII, Episcopi nysenni, *Opera dogmatica minora, Oratio catechetica magna*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XLV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1863, p. 31.

¹² Biblical moral conscience reflects, on one part, the importance of personal communion between man and God as ground of moral responsibility and, on the other side, the dynamic demands that result from the communion with God. These two factors were decisive in the historical evolution of moral conscience. Nevertheless, we must notice with due reverence that in the Old Testament the danger of moral legalism, a notion much outside moral conscience, which ignores good will or bad of the person and which see moral value as an external fulfillment of the law. Later on, this exterior legality will resurface: after its first appearance in Judaism, it will give up its place to the scholastic decadence and will reach its height of theoretical expression along Kant's categorical imperative.

This evolution towards a personalization of moral patristic conscience determines us to undergo a new stage of reasoning – from this moment, conscience is not being considered as a distinct person, imposed upon the subject, but being identified with the person itself. Thus, conscience fully undertakes the responsibility for the behavior of the individual, who acts right or wrong, which suffers and is troubled or lives tranquilly, which, who, at a given moment, must make a final decision.

In this sense, conscience is the most intimate part of man – *tameion*, according to St. Basil the Great¹³, or *penetrabile*, according to Augustine¹⁴. This explains the resurgence of “existential harassment” in the moment in which moral conscience does not coincide with the profound individual. No one has made a more thorough analysis of this existential in-tranquillity than Augustine. The self-criticism he makes in his Confessions shows the psychological maturity of his existential analysis¹⁵.

Moral conscience appears in the writings of the Holy Fathers in the form of a precedent or anterior conscience (*proegoumene syneidesis*) and in the form of an ulterior or consecutive conscience (*epomene syneidesis*). Ulterior, consecutive, conscience seems to identify itself, especially in the case of the Latin Fathers, with a character pleading in a court-of-law. This analogy may be explained by the legal interests of the Roman world, especially in the West¹⁶.

As regards precedent, anterior, conscience, it is not explicitly described by the Latin Fathers, fact owing undoubtedly to the importance placed by the West on the psycho-legal aspects, which is also the primacy, rarely and spontaneously attributed to criticism or analysis of our previous behavior. On the contrary, the Greek Fathers insist upon the theological and moral aspects of conscience. Before all, they see in it the “reason” of God who calls us to authentically practice a Christian life. That is why they speak aloud of previous conscience, which is inserted in this perspective easier and more profoundly. In the course of history, the Greek Fathers have

¹³ S.P.N. BASILII, *Homiliae XIX*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XXXI, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1857), 492 A.

¹⁴ S. AURELII AUGUSTINI, *Sermo XIII*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XXXVIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1877, p. 110 B.

¹⁵ S. AURELII AUGUSTINI, *Sermo XLVII*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XXXV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1877, p. 1694.

¹⁶ Also in the East it is presented like a witness sometimes, or as an accuser, and sometimes as a judge.

been, most certainly, the first to have treated previous moral conscience in an explicit and systematic manner.

II. Conscience as the guidance of spiritual life

In Patristic thought, conscience plays a crucial role in the practice of moral life. Thus, St. Clement of Alexandria affirms that: “conscience is a means for the precise choice of good and the avoidance of evil, for a correct life”¹⁷. St. John Chrysostom awards a great deal of attention to conscience. Having much faith in the sufficiency of conscience he writes: “It is in conscience that we have a true teacher and the help deriving therefrom must not be ignored”¹⁸.

Origen considers conscience as an internal tutor that guides us on right way¹⁹, while St. John Chrysostom offers an ample and systematic expose of conscience as a moral guide²⁰.

Conscience as a moral guide has both positive and negative aspects. It tells us what is right, what is to be done, but also what is wrong, what must be avoided. The importance of conscience as a moral guide is emphasized by St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John Climacus and others. In Orthodoxy, according to St. Maximus the Confessor, “we accept the Grace or God-given freedom as the source of power of human liberty, so that the freedom of a spiritual man reinforces that of another man in his freedom”²¹. St. Maximus urges do not dishonor your conscience, who always provides good advice, for its is your angelic and godly advisor. Similarly, St. John Climacus advises: “After God, let us have our conscience as a rule and goal in everything”²².

¹⁷ CLEMENTIS ALEXANDRINI, *Stromata*, I, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus VIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1857, p. 1.

¹⁸ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliarum in Genesium*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LIV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 1.

¹⁹ ORIGENIS, *Commentaria in Evangelium Ioannis*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XIV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 893 C.

²⁰ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliarum in Genesium*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LIV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862), pp. 471; 636; 461-463.

²¹ St. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Mystagogia*, Apostoliki Diakonias tis Ekklisias Publishing House Athens, 1973, p. 57.

²² St. JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Norman Russel, Paulist Press, Mahawa NJ, 1982, p. 124.

III. Conscience as a moral judge and as ground for moral responsibility

The activity of conscience as a moral judge is intimately related to its activity as guide or tutor for the moral life. The Fathers of the Church have underlined the character of judgment and of decision-making incorporated by conscience: Open the doors of your conscience and regard the judgment that takes place in your mind.

Conscience judges our right and wrongful deeds. When we act correctly, it remains silent, and when we proceed wrongfully, on the contrary, it prosecutes. The function of conscience of developing our sense of moral responsibility is also underlined in the Patristic writings: “The Lord... created man by putting in his being an impartial prosecutor – the conscience”²³. Playing this role of incorruptible judge, conscience is impartial. The Fathers have affirmed its objectiveness. Thus, St. John Chrysostom insists upon the role that conscience is called upon to play:

“Is there something more burdensome than sin? No matter how stupid we are, desiring not to sense it, no matter how much we try in hiding it from the world, conscience is provoked by the sin against ourselves. Conscience is like an incorruptible judge which, being constantly educated, it inflicts a vivid and continuous pain, is like an executioner that tears up apart and chokes us, displaying the enormity of the sin”²⁴.

That is why, according to St. John “within conscience there are no scratching, no greed in order to corrupt judgment”.

²³ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliarum in Genesium*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 135.

²⁴ *First Baptismal Catechesis*, 28, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 50, Wenger (ed.), 1957, pp. 122-123. “That who perpetrated the sin or an indecent deed (*atopos praxis*), even should he manage to conceal it from men cannot conceal it from this accuser that restlessly surrounds us, which is inside, which torments him, slaps him without ceasing, which appears before him in the market place, at the table, in his sleep demanding explanations for his maneuvers, putting before him the indecency of his sins and the punishment to follow” – S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliarum in Genesium*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 135. See other fragments referring to the activity of conscience: *Conciones VII de Lazaro* (Homily 4, 4), coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XLVIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 101 C, D; Homily 1, 11, p. 979 BC.

According to these texts, it would appear that conscience functions in an almost automatic fashion. In reality, St. John does not ignore the mechanisms of self-defense that appear in front the sentiment of guilt²⁵, but he urges to an effort of lucidity and clear thought which, in his own terms, would be called the courage to launch a process of conscience which, in fact, is a process of self-conscience:

“There is a reasoning which, far from giving way to shame, is the source of a great benefit. Alongside your conscience, make room for your reason, as judge, then compare your faults, make the inventory of the sins of your soul and determine it to make a rigorous confession”²⁶.

This fidelity²⁷ of conscience is particularly hard to suffer:

“You will tell me: how shall we make justice against ourselves? Weep, sigh with sadness, humble yourself, torment your body, remember your sins as per their liking. This trial of your soul is not a small thing. That who had repentance knows of the grief that it inflicts... No, it is not a small thing for our change to gather all of our sins, to twist and turn them as per their liking. By doing so, we will be penetrated by such a great repentance, that we will consider ourselves unworthy of living”²⁸.

Under such circumstances, it is not at all a wonder that man tries to escape this trial by “contracting” the habit of putting forth an erroneous judgment

²⁵ “Sinners notice the fact that sin is a wrong thing. But they are daily rejoicing their passions, do not want to acknowledge them, although their conscience acknowledges such” – *Homiliae XII in Epistolam ad Colossenses*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XLII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, 318 A.

²⁶ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliae in Mattheum*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XLVII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 454 D. “Let us rule against ourselves with the greatest of righteousness. Let us be party, without hesitation, to the tribunal of conscience and therein let us examine profoundly our thoughts and pass a righteous judgment” – S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliarum in Genesium*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 524 CD.

²⁷ Impartiality or objectiveness of conscience is the result of the *involuntary* character of its activity: its independence from will.

²⁸ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliae in Mattheum*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LVII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1863, p. 450 AB.

(“self-deceiving judgment by shameful judgments” – the compromise by self-delusion) over realities, with the purpose of diminishing such mistakes or even that of pretending that they “do not exist”. In the end, the question of becoming blind is at stake²⁹, that of creating an illusion: “the ill eye confounds things among each other; this is how it is for the soul tormented by wrong desires”³⁰.

Saint John Chrysostom condemns this blinding that determines Christians, via the lack of sincerity, to lose any possibility to appreciate their spiritual reality to its real value. He so describes a man of compromise:

“You bear in yourselves the vice of pompous names. To be perseverant in hippodromes or theatres is what you mean by civilization; being rich – freedom; being in love with glory – generosity; arrogance is sincerity; lust – love of man; unjustness – courage – lastly, as if such fraud would not suffice, you give virtue names that are contrary thereto: you call prudence rusticity; finesse cowardice; justice cowardice; contempt of luxury diminishment; bearing of wrongfulness weakness”³¹.

A person that through its moral life has acquired an un-accusing conscience is known to be a saint. But there are situations in which the absence of a remorse is the result of immorality and of evil. St. John Climacus notes: “Let us carefully observe whether or not our conscience has ceased from accusing us not as a result of our cleanliness, but due to the fact that we are immersed in evilness”³². In this way, an un-accusing conscience is the sign that either a person is a great saint or that he is a great sinner.

²⁹ “When thieves and criminals decide to steal a treasure they commence by turning off the lights. It is the same what corrupt reason does when we are on the verge of perpetrating a sin. And the light of reason always sins, but s soon as the spirit of lust is impetuously present, it makes the flame disappear and immediately thereafter the soul is thrown into darkness. It is then when the enemy empowers itself over it and dispossess it of everything it has. Abiding by an evil desire is for the soul what the night is for the eye: intelligence loses its ability to see”. – *Homiliae XLIV in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LXI, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 92 B.

³⁰ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Comentarius in Epistoalm ad Galatas*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XXI, p. 622 B.

³¹ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Adversus eos qui apud se babent Subintroductas virgines*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LVII, p 359 D – 360 A.

³² St. JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, p. 58.

Saint John Chrysostom draws attention onto the origin of good conscience: “Good conscience derives from life and deeds that are good”³³, “we rejoice nothing more in our internal forum than a good conscience”, he says. A clear conscience, tranquil, is accompanied by interior peace, hope, courage and moral strength, desire for the truth and virtue, the absence of the fear of dying, spiritual love and joy. Such joy originating from a clear conscience is described by St. John Chrysostom:

“for the good spirits, joy is not the supreme power, nor uncorrupted health, nor the grace of authority, nor the power of the body, nor the abundance of meals, nor in the luxury of clothing, none of the things of the rich, which it claims, but spiritual fulfillment and a good conscience”.

Making clear the teaching of the Church in this matter, St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite adds: “To have an un-accusing conscience is indeed the pleasure of pleasures and the joy of joys”³⁴.

“The greatest feast is a good conscience... For the man that lives and acts in a right manner, even ordinary days are a celebration” says, in such beautiful words, St. John Chrysostom. In the case of extreme evil, the tranquility of conscience is the tranquility of a dead capability – at the level of moral conscience.

Conscience is understood in the most categorical fashion of self-consciousness. Both the Latin *conscientia* and the Greek *syneidesis* signify proper “awareness”. The basic function of conscience is that of revealing ourselves. This revelation of the self, in its specific manner, makes known the distance between our actual self and the image that we already have of ourselves in virtue of our “natural inclination”. Such a deceiving tranquillity, as aforementioned, is lastly the result of a weakened self-conscience, the weakening of which is due not only to certain sins repeated throughout a prolonged period of time, but also to the self-deceiving “rationalization”. Hesychius of Sinai warns that: “If a person deceives its conscience through shameful arguments, it will fall in a tormenting death of oblivion”. Since

³³ *Homilia I in Epistolam secundam ad Corinthios*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LXI, p. 13.

³⁴ St. NICODEMUS THE HAGIORITE, *Symbouleutikon Encheiridion Handbook of Counsel*, Viena, 1801, p. 186.

conscience censors our sins (as well as our thoughts and desires), it acts as prosecutor (*antidikos*). Thus, for Avva Dorotheus, “conscience is our prosecutor, for it always is opposed to our desires and censors them, in order for us to do what is right and not what is wrong, and accuses us”³⁵. Dorotheus discovers the prosecutorial function of conscience in the affirmation of Christ the Saviour as written down by Matthew (5, 25): “As long as you are him on the way”, which means, in Dorotheus’s view “as long as you are in this world” – as was said also by St. Basil the Great. Conscience is our “plaintiff” with whom we need to make peace from this very life, as long as one is in this world. St. John Chrysostom says that

“even in this life the sinner encounters punishment for his sins... Regard into his conscience: there you will find the tumultuous unrest of his sins, you will see him surrounded by fear, torment, discord. As in a sort of tribunal, the mind sits as a judge on the royal throne of the conscience, using memory for what it did, interrupting the course of thoughts and ruthlessly stirring the sins committed, which await forgiveness. It is impossible to find peace in front of the prosecuting voice, even when tormented by deeds known only by God”³⁶.

Conscience does not judge only our deeds, but also our dispositions. St. Macarius says: “Conscience censors those thoughts that consent to the sin”³⁷. But the prosecutorial activity of conscience is a painful experience. St. John Chrysostom says that “the one that lives in evilness experiences the torments of hell, before hell, being tormented by his conscience”. That is why “nothing is more burdensome on man and nothing depresses his soul that the consciousness of sin”.

Many such affirmations are to be found in the Holy Fathers, including in their hymns. “Behold, I have been judged: behold, I, the wretched, have been condemned by my conscience and nothing in the world is more painful”³⁸. In the Great Oktoih we find the following verse: “I am trembling

³⁵ S. DOROTHEUS, Archimandrita, *Expositione et Doctrinae diverse*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LXXXVIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1864, p.1653.

³⁶ Cf. DELHAYE, *La conscience morale du chrétienne*, pp. 72-73.

³⁷ S. DOROTHEUS, Archimandrita, *Expositione et Doctrinae diverse*, p. 1653.

³⁸ *Grand Oktoih*, Venice edition, 1876, p. 263.

when thinking of your arrival, oh, Lord, for I have my judgment before the judgment; in the interior of my conscience, I accuse myself before the flames of the inferno”³⁹.

IV. Conscience as a factor of moral renewal

Alongside the functioning of conscience as a moral guide and judge, we also encounter it as an enlightener. Avva Thalasius says that “a clear conscience revives the soul”. Other Fathers specify the manners in which conscience awakes oneself. Thus, according to St. Macarius, “conscience awakes natural thoughts which fill the heart”⁴⁰. He identifies “natural thoughts” with “pure thoughts”, which were created by God. Conscience evokes humbleness: “conscience returns the soul to itself, determining it to be humble”⁴¹.

It is not enough to have a well formed conscience, capable of reasoning correctly the realities of the self, for this first stage needs to go further. In a word, after acknowledgement, the sin must be “burnt” by means of the memory, to which St. John Chrysostom attributes an important role⁴². In respect of the benefit of this, he says:

“It is good for us to admit to our sins and remember them continuously. There is nothing better for healing the mistake than this continuous remembrance, nothing better to keep awake the fear from evil; conscience is opposed and cannot stand to be disturbed by the remembrance of passions... Nevertheless, how many good things are born from the remembrance of sins! Thus we imprint them in our thoughts. I know that the soul

³⁹ *Grand Oktoih*, Venice edition, 1851, p. 119.

⁴⁰ St. MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN, *Spiritual Homilies*, LeClue, 2008, p. 23.

⁴¹ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliae XXXIV in Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LXIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1863, p. 81.

⁴² “To vest oneself in a cloak, to lock oneself in a cell, to remain down in darkness, it is not only in such that remorse is to be demonstrated. You still need to go back and come back unceasingly to the remembrance of your own passions, to examine your conscience as to your thoughts to continuously measure the length of the road that separates you from the Kingdom of God” – S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliae in Mattheum*, p. 410 A.

cannot stand a memory so bitter, but we will constrict it with perseverance”⁴³.

Having remorse for a personal sin is to admit it. Not for considering us as sinners, but in order to acknowledge the status of our own sins and our false impressions with respect to us. This remorse is an act of self-conscience, of clear reason, without declarative reasoning, which in fact are untrue:

“Assuredly, anyone who has sinned is pitiful and worthy of philanthropy, but you, who are convince that you have not sinned, how can you pretend to be pitiful, when you have no shame for your downsides? Let us be convinced that we have sinned, let us not say that only with our mouths, but with our reason, let us not declare ourselves guilty all of the sudden, but let us recap our remorse and put them in order according them to their likelihood”⁴⁴.

Remembering your sins and admitting them means ensuring the victory of light over darkness⁴⁵, but this victory is not only intellectual, reasonable,

⁴³ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliae XXXIV in Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, p. 261 B and 217 A. “Let us remember the ardor of our conscience, let us hurt our soul by remembering our sins but not for saddening it or unsettling it, but to make it accomplished, to make it abstinent and attentive and thus make it rise to heavens. There is nothing more appropriate to kill indifference than the pain and remorse that gathers the soul from its paths and determine it to find itself” – *De incomprehensibili Dei natura* (Homily 3), coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 28, p. 311.

⁴⁴ S.P.N. JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homiliae XXXIV in Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, p. 216 C. For St. John, this admittance (remorse) is not simply public, because such a confession may serve for exhibitionism (please see: *To Theodoros*, 21, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 117, pp. 208-210). He condemns such a declarative pharisaic theatre of appearances. for him remorse is an ontological and personal act that encompasses both the soul of the man and the confession as a mystery of the Church. In fact, the entire thinking of St. John on repentance is marked by the Christological or, better said, Eucharistic character of repentance.

⁴⁵ The ascertainment and acknowledgement of sin is the ascertainment of the own disease which hidden within the body spreads as an infection throughout the limbs. Similarly, sin committed in darkness, in the stoned and unfeeling conscience, remains hidden and continues to be perpetrated as in a darkness of all-knowing and of the illuminating reason. But when self-consciousness remarks the disease that is unfeelingly spreading and reason sheds light into the soul, then sin is evidenced and killed through the holy remorse of conscience: “As a wound remains concealed within the body, spreading deep, as long as it is not attended, the same is the sin: as long is it remain hidden,

but it is also a victory at the level of reflection, a sensed acknowledgement of the sin and of the sinful status:

“Not feeling any pain, you do not take into consideration your sins. Behold what you should do in order to mourn: not to feel any pain for your sins! The hat you do not weep, there is the sin. For not weeping does not come from the absence of sin, but from the souls that sins is insensate. Think of those that are sensate to their sins: how they weep more painfully than those who are burnt or hurt, think to all that they do and accept... with the purpose of setting them free of the guilty conscience. Assuredly they would not react as such should they not feel vivid pains in their souls”⁴⁶.

St. John Climacus also mentions the holy remorse as an effect of active conscience. He characterizes remorse as a “redemptory sadness”, because joy and sadness come together, as honey in the honeycomb. Remorse (as atonement) leads to the love of God and of our neighbor. St. Nicetas Stethatos observes that nothing raises the soul to the love of God and the love of man such as humility, remorse and clear prayer.

V. Conclusion

With a more increased frequency, Christians refer to conscience as the “voice of God” that is heard in each person’s soul and which works good

we perpetrate it in darkness, without repentance, but if exposed, then there is light” – *Homiliae XXIV in Epistolam ad Ephesios* (Homily 18, 1), coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LXII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1863, p. 122 BC.

⁴⁶ S.P.N. Joannis Chrysostomi, *Homiliae in Mattheum*, p. 212 B. “The attentive man, should he fall into sin, will immediately react, but that who is tender and sleepy does not sense him being caught by evil” – *Homiliae LXXXVIII in Joannem*, Homily 5, 4, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus LIX, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1863, p. 59 B.

“Not feeling pain following the wounds caused by the devil is a grave thing especially because lack of sense. In fact, he who is hurt for the first time and lack to react would be more vulnerable for the second and then the third time”. – *De Sacerdotio libri VI* (6, 13), coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XLVIII, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1862, p. 691 AB.

therein. For Augustine, conscience is, before all, the voice of God.⁴⁷ This voice echoes in the depths of man⁴⁸. Origen explains what is this voice that so profoundly resounds in man. Conscience, he says, is the “thought” that leads the soul on the straight path, exactly like a tutor⁴⁹. Patristic tradition has raised conscience to the status of important component of moral life. The teachings of the Fathers on conscience are founded on Scripture, especially on the conception of St. Paul the Apostle, as well as on their spiritual experience. It is a product of their holy life, in accordance with the reason and the word of God. The true rule of conscience is Christ. Moral conscience is the inner resounding of the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. All our consciences are, in a manner, contained by Christ’s conscience. Only in Christ and with Christ do they get to be their selves. In Christ and in the Holy Spirit they reach the plenitude of maturity and only in Christ do they get to be accomplished, in accordance with Providence and the Father’s immortal life. The more a Christian is united with Christ in the Holy Spirit, the more his conscience gets to be identified with Christ’s conscience. Christian conscience is nothing but the internalization of this voice of Christ through the Church, namely the Holy Spirit. It is essentially ecclesiastical. Depending on the ecclesial degree reached by conscience, one can talk about a warranty that Christ truly speaks in the depths of our hearts: “the ecclesial person, the man of Orthodoxy resists only in relation with God, the Fountain of life”⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ S. AURELII AUGUSTINI, *De Sermone Domini in Monte*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XXXIV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1877, p. 1283 C.

⁴⁸ S. AURELII AUGUSTINI, *Tractatus in Iohannem*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XXXV, J-P. Migne (ed.), Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1877, p. 1382 D.

⁴⁹ ORIGENIS, *Commentaria in Evangelium Ioannis*, coll. *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Tomus XIV, p. 803 A-D.

⁵⁰ Χρυσόστομος ΣΤΑΜΟΥΛΗΣ, *Κάλλος το άγιον*, Εκδ. Ακρίτας, Αθήνα, 2004, p. 160.