

A Catholic Catechism

“Ye Shall Know the Truth”

Abp. Fulton J. Sheen

www.keepthefait.org

Lesson 2

CD 2, Track 2 (23:55)

Conscience

(The Unbearable Repartee)

Peace be to you.

A man of the theater came to see me a few years ago and his reason was this: He said that one night after his show he was talking to a number of theatrical people back stage and they said to him. *“You are a Catholic aren’t you?”*. He said *“I used to be”*. But he said *“I’ve done considerable reading in comparative religion, psychology, psychiatry, metaphysics and I had to give it up, and nobody could answer my questions”*. Someone said *“why don’t you go to Bishop Sheen and have him answer your questions.”* So he said *“here I am and I have a number of questions I would like to put to you.”* And I said to him *“now before you ask a single question you go back to the hotel where you were living, get rid of that chorus girl your living with and then come back and ask questions.”* He threw up his hands, he laughed and he said *“oh certainly. I am trying to fool you just like I fooled myself.”* That’s the reason. I saw him not very long ago and I said *“well you are still off the track aren’t you?”* He said *“yes but I have not thrown away the map.”* Now here was a perfect example of **someone covering up conscience** and it is of conscience that we would speak **for conscience carries on with us a kind of unbearable repartee.**

Man’s Difference:

We are very different from the rest of creatures regardless of how much we insist on similarities.

➤ What makes us different is that **we can reflect**, turn back upon ourselves.

No stone can ever turn a part of itself on another part of itself. No page of a book can so completely be absorbed in another page of the book that it understands that page. But we humans, we have the **power of looking at ourselves** in a kind of a mirror.

➤ We can be pleased with ourselves.

➤ We can be angry with ourselves.

And so it is possible for us to have tensions of all kinds which do not happen to animals. You will never in your life see a rooster with an oedipus complex. You

will never, never see a pig with an oedipus complex. No animal ever has a complex. Scientist have induced ulcers indeed in some animals but they were introduced by humans. The animal left to itself however, never feels this tension, we do.

- We feel a **tension between** what **we are** and what **we ought to be**.
- Between the ideal and the fact.

We are somewhat like a mountain climber, we see the peak way up at the top to which we are climbing and which we hope to attain and down below we see the abyss into which at any time we might fall.

Now why is it that conscience does trouble us this particular way, when it does not trouble the rest of creatures?

Why is it we try to escape it? Think of how many abnormal ways there are of avoiding it, sleeping tablets, alcoholism, these are just a few of the ways of **avoiding this unbearable repartee**. Then have you ever notice how **pessimistic** some people become. They are always expecting rain on the day of the picnic. Everything is going to turn out to be a catastrophe. They know it. Why do they take this attitude? Because in their own heart and soul they know very well that the way that they are living and violating their conscience **deserves some kind of an unfavorable judgment** and so they bring back that judgment upon themselves and are always **awaiting the electric chair**.

Hyper-criticism:

Their judgments are influenced by this pessimistic attitude. Another psychological manifestation of avoidance of conscience is **hyper-criticism**. The neighbor is always wrong. And have you ever noticed the letters that are sent to the newspapers they begin with: The trouble with my husband is this. I cannot stand my wife because... My son is stubborn... And then in the ordinary affairs of life the poor neighbor can **never do anything good**.

Why this hypercritical attitude?

Abraham Lincoln once gave the right answer to it. He was going into a hospital in Alexandria during the Civil War and at a time when presidents were not well known because Brady had not circulated all of his photographs. And as he went into the hospital some young man running out bumped into Lincoln, sent him sprawling on the floor and he shouted at Lincoln, "*Get out of the way you big long, lean, lanky stiff!*" And Lincoln looked up at him and said "*Young man, what's troubling you on the inside?*" And so with hyper-criticism. We are so conscious of a **real sense of justice that if we do not "right" ourselves we have to be "righting" everybody else**. For example, you cannot go into a room where there are a series of pictures and one of them is 2 inches awry without straightening out that picture. You want everything in order. **We want everything in order except ourselves.**

Shakespeare's/Macbeth:

Then there are **more serious escapes** from this *unbearable repartee*; and in order to let you know that human nature has always acted in the same way, let us go back to Shakespeare.

In his great tragedy Macbeth, Shakespeare long before we had any of the profound findings of psychiatry, described a perfect case of **psychosis** and a perfect case of **neurosis**. It was Macbeth that had the psychosis, Lady Macbeth, his wife, had the neurosis. You remember the story in order to obtain the throne, Banquo the King was murdered. **Conscience bothered** Macbeth so much that he developed a **psychosis** and he began to see the ghost of Banquo. He imagined he saw him seated at a table. The dagger that killed the king was constantly before him. "*What is this dagger before my eye?*" It was just imagination, but the projection of his inner guilt and then note, the great wisdom of Shakespeare, in pointing out that whenever there is a **revolution against conscience** there will **very often come skepticism, doubt, atheism, a complete negation of the philosophy of life.** And Macbeth reached its stage where to him life was just a candle. "*Out, out brief candle.*" Life had no meaning and so the *petty pace creeps on from day to day. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools their way to dusty death.*"

I tell you skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism have not rational foundations. Their foundations are in the **moral order**. **First there was a revolt against conscience.**

Then look at **Lady Macbeth**. Her guilt manifested itself in the **neurosis**. And the maid said of Lady Macbeth that she washed her hands every quarter of an hour. There was a **sense of guilt** in her which she had **completed negated** and instead of washing her soul, as she knows she should have done, she **projected it to her hands**. And her hands were always smeared with blood it seemed. She said that "*not all of the waters of the seven seas were enough to wash this blood incarnadine from her hands.*"

Guilt will out: The lesson of Confession

And one can see it when one knows souls well, so very easily. I was once instructing a young woman and she had finished on tape and on records, not these but others which I had made before. She had finished about 15 hours and after the first instruction on confession she said to my secretary, "*I am finished, no more lessons, I do not want to hear anything about the Catholic church from now on.*" My secretary phoned me and I said, "*Ask her to finish the other three on the subject of confession and then I will see her.*" I saw her at the end of the three and she was in a veritable crisis. She was screaming, shrieking "*Let me out of here! Let me out*

of here! I never want to hear anything again about the church after hearing this talk on confession.”

Well it took about 5 minutes to calm her down and I said, “*Listen my good girl, there is absolutely no proportion between what you have heard and the way you are acting. So there has to be something else. Do you know what I think is wrong? I think you’ve had an abortion.*” She said “**YESSS,**” **so happy that it was out.** Now see how that bad conscience came out and attacked upon confession, the truths of faith, that was not the problem.

Very often we will find that an attack upon religion satisfies for the moment this **uneasy conscience.**

Now what does this conscience mean, what significance has it for us?

Well conscience is something like the United States government. The United States government is divided into three offices, the **Legislative**, the **Executive** and the **Judicial**. The Legislative, Congress that makes laws. The Executive, the President, who witnesses to the conformity of law in action and finally the Supreme Court which judges that conformity. Now we have all of these inside of us.

➤ First of all we have a **Congress**, there is a **law inside** saying “*thou shalt, thou shalt not.*” *I might interrupt myself for a moment to define conscience very simply as conscience is that which makes you feel good after, and wrong is that which make you feel bad after.*

So we **have a law**, “*thou shalt, thou shalt not.*” Where does this law come from? From myself? No, if it did I could do away with it. If I made it, I could unmake it. Does it come from society? It does not, because sometimes conscience praises me when society condemns me and sometimes conscience will condemn me when society praises me. Where does it come from then, if not from myself? Where then does the Executive side of conscience come from? It too judges whether or not I have obeyed that law, **it says “I was there, I saw you!”** And though others will say, “*oh pay no attention to it,*” one knows very well that one must and one also knows the motives that inspire the act and **finally it judges us.** And if therefore, it praises us for certain actions and **we feel somewhat** the same happiness and joy that we would from **being praised by a father or mother.** If we feel the same sadness and unhappiness that we feel when condemned by a father or a mother, it must be that behind conscience is **some person, the Divine Thou.** It is the *standard of our life.*

➤ Most of the **mental problems** from which people suffer today is due to a **mental revolt against this law which is written in their own hearts.** And how often just

as soon people **return again** to conscience, **peace comes back**, happiness. Life is very, very different and that is what we are after, **peace of soul**. Therefore this *unbearable repartee* is only **one side of conscience**, it is the conscience that **tells us when we do wrong** so that we feel on the inside as if we have **broken a bone**; the **bone pains** because the bone is not where it ought to be. **Our conscience troubles us because the conscience is not where it ought to be.**

➤ And thanks to this power of **self-reflection** that we have, we can see ourselves, and particularly at night, as the poet put it, “*every atheist is afraid in the dark*” and it’s a gentle voice saying “*you are unhappy, this is not the way,*” your freedom is never destroyed but you feel the sweet summons and you ask, “*Why is not stronger?*” It’s strong enough, if we would listen, and God respects our freedom that he gave us.

You perhaps may have seen a [painting of Holman Hunt](#). It is a picture of our Blessed Lord standing at an ivy-covered door, a lantern in his hand and knocking. Holman Hunt was very much criticized for that painting and the critics said “*there was no latch on the outside of the door.*” That was right. There was no latch on the outside of the door. It was conscience. **The door is opened from the inside.**

God Love You.

Questions:

1. What in today's lesson stood out most to you?

2. How does today's lesson on conscience change your way of thinking about the "person behind the little voice"?

3. When Sheen say "...*Very often we will find that an attack upon religion satisfies for the moment this **uneasy conscience**...*"; how have you seen this in your life experance?

Outline Notes:

If you have questions, go to a knowledgeable source for answers.

But . . . Clean up your life before seeking answers.

Conscience

Carries on with us an unbearable repartee

Humans are unique in the area of conscience

Animals/inanimate objects have no conscience

Causes us to reflect, turn back upon ourselves

Not possible with animals/inanimate objects

We can be pleased/angry with ourselves

Humans have tensions of all kinds which animals do not.

What we are and what we ought to be (ideal & fact)

Causes us to feel well after . . . Causes us to feel badly after . . .

Much like being praised or rebuked by a parent

Conscience troubles us:

Escape from conscience

- Sleeping pills
- Alcohol & other substances
- Attacks upon religion

Pessimism

Result of the attempt to avoid/escape conscience.

Is it always going to rain on your picnic/parade?

Result of pessimistic attitude/self judgment

Hypercriticism

Another result of the attempt to escape conscience

Exhibits a troubled interior (troubled conscience)

Manifestation of failure in our desire to have everything in order

Skepticism

A revolution against conscience

Negation of the philosophy of life

Gnosticism & Atheism

Manifestation of guilt (conscience)

Since conscience includes feeling good or feeling bad as being praised or rebuked by a parent **there must be some "person" behind Conscience - -**
The Divine Thou!

A return to conscience destroys all those manifestations of escape/revolt and returns one to a state of peacefulness.

The door of conscience is opened **only** from the inside.

Reference:

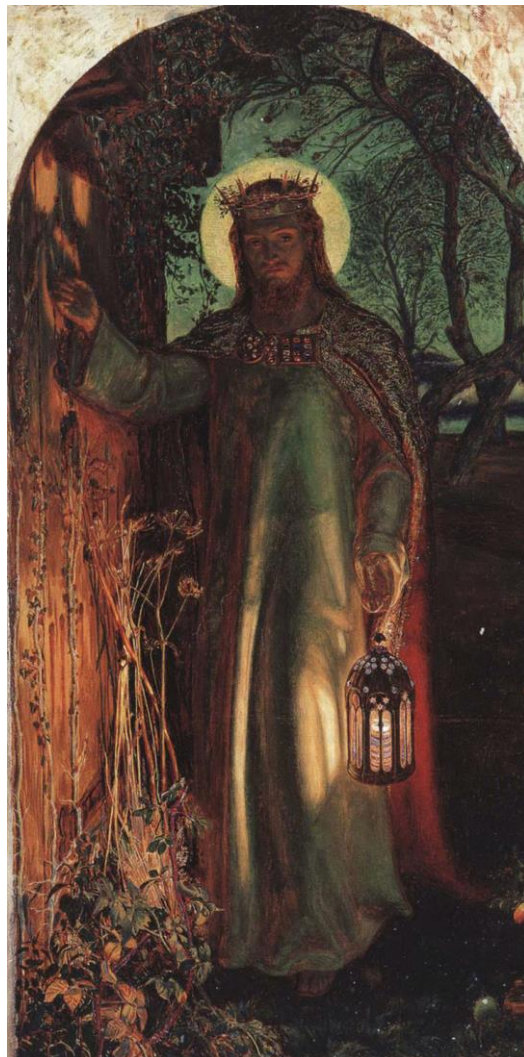
“repartee.”

a : a quick and witty reply

b : a succession or interchange of clever retorts : amusing and usually light sparring with words

2: adroitness and cleverness in reply : skill in repartee

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repartee>



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hunt_Light_of_the_World.jpg

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

To view the context, please visit <https://www.kofc.org/en/catechism/index.html> or

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

33. "The human person: with his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his **CONSCIENCE, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God's existence. In all this he discerns signs of his spiritual soul. The soul, the 'seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material', [GS 18 # 1; cf. 14 # 2.] can have its origin only in God."**

46. "When he listens to the message of creation and to the voice of **CONSCIENCE, man can arrive at certainty about the existence of God, the cause and the end of everything. "**

160 To be human, "man's response to God by faith must be free, and... therefore nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will. the act of faith is of its very nature a free act."³⁹ "God calls men to serve him in spirit and in truth. Consequently they are bound to him in conscience, but not coerced. . . This fact received its fullest manifestation in Christ Jesus."⁴⁰ Indeed, Christ invited people to faith and conversion, but never coerced them. "For he bore witness to the truth but refused to use force to impose it on those who spoke against it. His kingdom... grows by the love with which Christ, lifted up on the cross, draws men to himself."⁴¹

162. "Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man. We can lose this priceless gift, as St. Paul indicated to St. Timothy: 'Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good **CONSCIENCE. By rejecting **CONSCIENCE**, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith.' [1 Tim 1:18-19 .] To live, grow and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; [Cf. Mk 9:24 ; Lk 17:5 ; Lk 22:32 .] it must be 'working through charity,' abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church. [Gal 5:6 ; Rom 15:13 ; cf. Jam 2:14-26 .]"**

To view the context, please visit

847. "This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their **CONSCIENCE - those too may achieve eternal salvation. [LG 16; cf. DS 3866-3872.] "**

To view the context, please visit http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P29.HTM