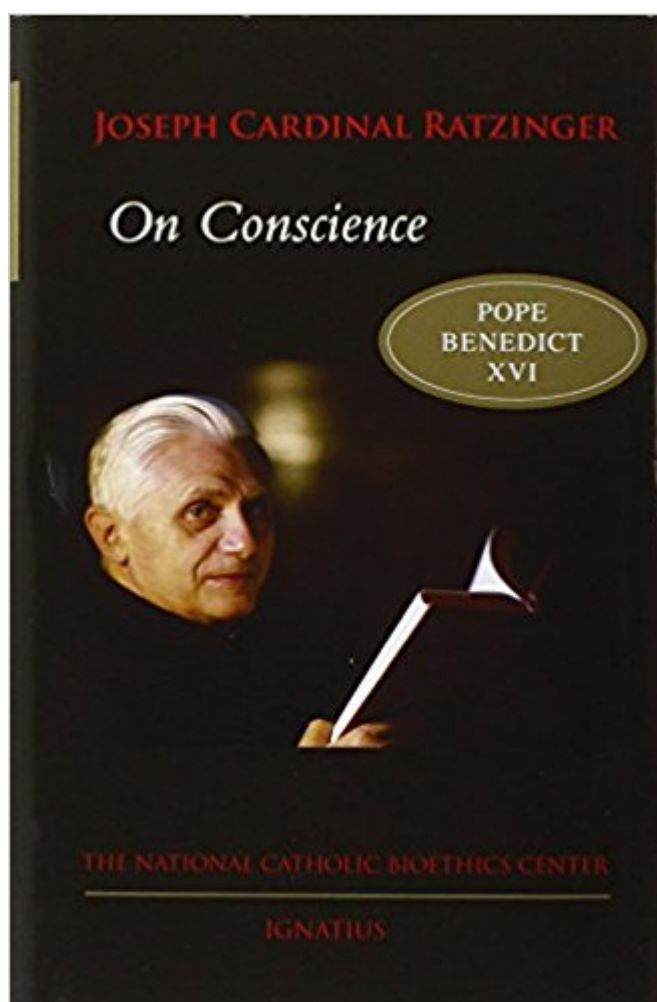


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On Conscience (Bioethics & Culture)



Synopsis

Prepared and co-published by the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, this book is a combination of two lengthy essays written by Cardinal Ratzinger and delivered in talks when he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Both talks deal with the importance of conscience and its exercise in particular circumstances. Ratzinger's reflections show that contemporary debates over the nature of conscience have deep historical and philosophical roots. He says that a person is bound to act in accord with his conscience, but he makes it clear that there must be reliable, proven sources for the judgment of conscience in moral issues, other than the subjective reflections of each individual. The always unique and profound insights that the new Pope Benedict XVI brings to perennial problems reminds the reader of his strong warning before the recent Papal conclave of the great dangers today of the "dictatorship of relativism."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To the best of my knowledge, these essays were presented in English (both were keynote addresses to bishops' workshops.) and it may partly this fact - their lack of translation by a second party - that makes the texts so wonderfully approachable. Having studied a great amount of Ratzinger's work from his more than forty-year career, I feel that I have a decent grasp of his world-view, approach and theological method. Absolutely consistent with his previous and following work, the essays reprinted in "On Conscience" (one from 1984, the other 1991) are real gems. What

is perhaps the most interesting and significant feature of these texts is the insider's view one obtains from the 1991 address. Written just under a year before the publication of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, of which Ratzinger was primary editor, this address highlights almost verbatim much of what is written in the CCC under the heading of conscience. I have to wonder whether or not the bishops at the time really appreciated the preview they were privy to. Both texts and the introduction total around 85 pages, so this is a very short read. I highly recommend it, especially for its clear language and well articulated views.

On Conscience is an essential book for anyone trying to figure out how to know the right thing to do in any given situation. Today there are many who -- while continuing to recognize that acting rightly (whatever that means) is still important -- a large number seem also to believe that anything is right as long as they sincerely think it is right. Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) shows very clearly, and very dramatically and convincingly, that this can not be true. While continuing to honor the ancient tradition that a certain conscience must be followed, he shows that there also must be a serious effort to form a correct conscience, and illustrates from recent human history what can happen if this effort to cultivate a correct conscience is not taken. This book deals directly with the apparent conflict between individual conscience and external authority. The only shortcoming of the book is that some of the explanations are unduly long, and make for dry reading as a result. Well worth the effort anyhow.

This small book ought to be near the top of the list for people who want to begin reading Pope Benedict. It has three distinct advantages as such an introductory text. First, the two talks on conscience are close to the center of his overall message, distinguishing personal subjective concepts of conscience and morality from objective truth. This of course has been restated many times since his papacy, but the second advantage here is its brevity and concentration on essences. But the real advantage here is the third -- these are 2 talks originally in English, no translation is necessary. Benedict's English is clear, direct and thereby modern -- also subtly colored without sounding merely academic, an effect sometimes left even after the best of translations. It is one of the best Benedict items in the Ignatius Press catalog, and amply speaks for itself and in rich dimensionality, belying its length.

Cardinal Ratzinger's *On Conscience* is published by The National Catholic Bioethics Center and Ignatius Press, and contains two essays by (later-to-be) Pope Benedict XVI. One essay is:

• Conscience and Truth • and the other is • Bishops, Theologians and Morality. • Here are some highlights to whet the appetite: Foreword: by John M. Haas (Bioethics Center): • Cardinal Ratzinger warned that the radical notion of a justifying, even though mistaken, conscience leads to a dictatorship of relativism, which invariably leads to a tyranny of the strong over the weak. (Pointing to US Supreme Court decisions.) Conscience and Truth: • [if conscience were infallible] there would be no Truth • | no real freedom • | There must be something deeper if freedom and, therefore, human existence are to have meaning. • [The identification of conscience with superficial consciousness, the reduction of man to his subjectivity, does not liberate but enslaves. • Certainly, one must follow an erroneous conscience. But the departure from truth that took place beforehand and now takes its revenge is the actual guilt, which first lulls man into false security and then abandons him in the trackless waste. • Bishops, Theologians and Morality: • | the renewal of morality is not just some rearguard action of a zealot opposed to progress, but the critical question on which any real progress will depend. • Conscience is understood by many as a sort of deification of subjectivity • | • morality needs a • we • and • a link with the experience of past generations and with the primitive wisdom of humanity. • it is impossible in the long run to have a society that lives • only as a reaction from what is negative and evil. • Conscience has a right to respect and obedience in the measure in which the person himself respects it and gives it the care which its dignity deserves. •

There are two essays in this slim volume and I'm basing this review on the first essay alone, Conscience and Truth. I have not read the second essay yet but even if it was terrible, though I'm sure it's wonderful, I would still give this five stars. I'm not sure how his book would play in the mind of a non-Catholic. But I would say first of all it should be must reading for any Catholic trying to hold his or her own in an increasingly non-religious world. For those considering our Faith it answers the important question of how conscience is paramount yet still under the guide of the papacy - two things that same in conflict but in fact, as Benedict writes, are in perfect harmony. There are a few technical terms but they're found in any household dictionary. I believe this book is particularly important for not only Americans dealing with the court ruling on same-sex marriage but here in Canada (where I live) where we are facing the onslaught of legalized euthanasia. After reading this I felt more assured that regardless of the changing tides of opinion and what passes for progress that the Truth will always win out. Please read it and then buy it as a gift for someone you care about it.

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