

## FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



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### CONSCIENCE AND ITS ROLE IN MORE DECISION MAKING? SHOULD WE ALWAYS FOLLOW OUR CONSCIENCE?

In the pre-Vatican days, we rarely heard anything about conscience. When it came to moral decision making our minds were made up for us by church authorities. They told us what was right and wrong. Our job was to obey without question. All moral issues were viewed in a clear cut black and white fashion.

Then came Vatican II, which brought to the fore front the issue of conscience and its vital role in our search for truth. The document on the *Church in the Modern World* #16 stated clearly the important role of conscience in the life of the Christian.

*Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Their conscience is people's most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one's neighbor.*

Commenting on paragraph #16 of the above document, theologian Fr. Joseph Razinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) wrote in 1968:

*Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed above all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official church, also establishes a principle in opposition to increasing totalitarianism.*

The role of conscience exploded on the whole scene in 1968 when Pope Paul VI published his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* condemning all artificial forms of birth control. Many Catholics and theologians were expecting a change in this teaching of the church. In fact, the majority of Paul VI's Commission set up to explore this issue recommended a change to the Pope.

#### What Conscience is Not

It is not a *feeling*. Often we hear people say "if it feels good, do it". Some people are very racist in their thinking and behavior and do not *feel* bad about it. Does this make their racist thinking and behavior morally okay? It certainly

doesn't. Another person may feel guilty for missing Mass on Sunday even though they were sick. Does their bad feeling make them truly guilty of sin? Again the answer is no. So we can see from the above two examples that it would be wrong to equivocate true conscience with a particular feeling.

Secondly, the voice of a true conscience should not be confused with the voice of the *super ego*. The *super ego* is the term psychologists use to describe the list of "shoulds" and "have to's" that we received from parental figures while we were growing up. Some of the "shoulds" were good e.g., you should never destroy a neighbor's property. Some of the shoulds were damaging to our growth, e.g., you should never cry or be emotionally vulnerable.

In contrast to the super ego, the voice of a true conscience moves us to do something because we ourselves have come to personally see the truth of some value, e.g. the value of community worship. True conscience is *value oriented*. Through a process of prayer, study, reflection, dialogue with others and one's own experience one comes to recognize a particular truth or value and is then moved to embrace it. In contrast, the super ego is *authority oriented*. We do something *only* because some external authority or law says we should. If we don't follow this "should" we may feel guilty.

#### What is conscience?

As opposed to some *external* authority telling us what is right and wrong, conscience is a law written in the care of our being by God calling us to do good and avoid evil. This inner voice helps us to distinguish right from wrong and nudges to *do* what is right and avoid what is wrong.

#### Seven Types of Conscience

Over the years, moral theologians have distinguished several *types* of conscience.

A *true or correct* Catholic conscience is one that has made a sincere effort to discover the truth and one that acts in accordance with the Word of God and the teachings of the church.

An *erroneous conscience* is one that is contrary to God's Word and the teachings of the church. One may have an erroneous conscience and not know it. For example, a couple may think that their marriage is recognized by the church when in fact it is not. A couple may think that "living together" prior to marriage is morally correct when in fact it is contrary to the teaching of the church.

A *bad conscience* is one that hasn't even inquired about what is right or wrong. It is a conscience that has no regard for objective truth.

A *weak conscience* is one that may know what is right but hasn't the courage or spiritual power to do what is right. Or

it may know what is wrong and sinful and yet it does it; e.g., a woman may know abortion is wrong but she does not have the psychological or moral strength needed to carry the baby to full term. A weak conscience is also one that is easily swayed by the opinions of other people.

A *scrupulous conscience* is one that frequently thinks that it is sinning when in fact it is not. For example, because of deformative and perfectionistic training in a particular area like sexuality, one may think that one is constantly sinning against the virtue of chastity. It has been said that a scrupulous person thinks that God is a tyrant. His God has an all seeing eye that watches his every move and is ready to pounce on him for every wrong act. A person with a scrupulous conscience needs to place himself under the guidance of a competent and compassionate confessor who will help to introduce him to the love and mercy of God.

A *lax conscience* is one that is insensitive to the good that ought to be done and the evil that ought to be shunned. For example one may be a racist or one may have little or no social conscience or be very permissive in sexuality issues.

An *informed conscience* is one that has sought to inform and educate itself about a particular moral issue. For Catholics informing one's conscience will always involve a prayerful reflection on what scripture and the official teaching of the church has to say on a particular issue.

Any of us may have several of the above conscience types at the same time. For example, we may have a *scrupulous conscience* concerning sexuality issues and a *lax conscience* about justice issues. We may be well informed about some moral issues and be quite unformed about other issues. Also there may be a moral area where we suffer from a weak conscience. We know what is right but we fail to do it or we know what is wrong and yet we do it.

### Should We Always Follow our Conscience?

It depends. The answer is 'no' if we are speaking about an *uninformed* conscience. The answer is 'yes' if we are speaking about an informed or educated conscience. For a Catholic, conscience is formed by scripture, the Church's magisterium and prayerful reflection on one's experience.

### The Primacy of Conscience

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- "He who acts against his conscience loses his soul." (Fourth Lateran council, 1215)
- "It is better to perish in excommunication than to violate one's conscience." (St. Thomas Aquinas)
- "I shall drink . . . To Conscience first, and to the Pope

afterwards." (Cardinal John Henry Newman)

- "If Newman places conscience above authority, he is not proclaiming anything new with respect to the constant teaching of the Church." (Pope John Paul II)
- "In the final analysis, conscience is inviolable and no person is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his/her conscience, as the moral tradition of the Church attests." (*Human Life in Our Day*, U.S. Bishops Pastoral)
- "A human being must always follow the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were to deliberately act against it he would condemn himself." Catechism of the Catholic Church #1790)
- "We follow church leaders only to the extent that they themselves follow Christ. . . Some situations oblige one to obey God and one's own conscience rather than the leaders of the church. Indeed, one may even be obliged to accept excommunication rather than act against one's own conscience." (Cardinal Walter Kasper, Head of Ecumenical Matters at the Vatican.)

### What if we make a moral decision that is in conflict with church teaching?

Sometimes a good and sincere Catholic may find him/herself in conflict with some moral teaching of the church. This is currently true for millions of Catholics when it comes to the issue of birth control. When this happens, moral theologians speak about *responsible* and *irresponsible* dissent. We can probably safely say that dissent is responsible if:

- We generally respect the *magisterium* (the official teaching of the church.)
- If we have made a reasonable effort to inform our conscience on a particular issue by checking to see what scripture and the church's magisterium has to say about a particular issue.
- If we brought the issue before God in prayer and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Fr. Kenneth Overberg S.J. writes:

*Conscientious Catholics take Church teachings very seriously. They recognize the danger of being blinded by the emotions of the moment; they acknowledge the possibility of failing to recognize the good of the whole out of a more narrow self-interest. They see Church teaching as one important antidote to these dangers. And they embrace that authority as one way of discovering the best and highest good for self and for others.*

*We North Americans have been raised in a culture which emphasizes individualism and fosters an abiding suspicion of authority. Catholicism's respect for Church teaching, therefore, can be especially challenging for us. But I believe that welcoming the guidance of authority is still a necessary counterbalance for understanding our Catholic emphasis on the sanctity of conscience.*

We can assume that *irresponsible* dissent is present when one has little or no respect for the church's teaching authority often voiced in these words: "I don't care what the Pope or

church says, I will do what I want in this issue.” Such a conscience could be called a *rebellious* conscience. One has become a Pope unto oneself.

### Three Helps to Moral Development

Every Catholic has an obligation to do everything possible to develop and form his/her conscience according to the teachings of Christ and his Church. The following are three steps that will facilitate moral growth and development:

- “*Become informed about the teachings of Christ and our church.* Our two primary sources should be the New Testament and the *Catechism of the Church.*”
- *Develop a faithful and honest prayer life.* A faithful and honest prayer life is another excellent help to us when it comes to discerning right from wrong and seeking the strength to actually do what is the right thing as we have discerned it. If we take time on a regular basis to meditate on the values of Jesus as found in the Scriptures, seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance in all our decisions, and frequently examine our thoughts, words and deeds in the light of the Gospels and the teachings of the church, we will be well on our way to developing a conscience that is both Christian and Catholic. A good football coach due to years of hard work, has an innate sense about football things. He can “read plays” and notice things that most of us miss. In a similar way, the dedicated disciple of Christ gradually develops a well-trained ear for the things of God and his church. Years of prayer will give him/her an innate sense for what is of God and what isn’t.
- *Belonging to a small faith sharing community.* Belonging to a small faith sharing community whose members seek to be faithful to Christ and his church can be a great help to our moral and spiritual growth. Such a group can be a good sounding board for us as we struggle with moral issues. Also, such a group can help us to see aspects of a moral issue that we may be overlooking.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1784-5, underlines the above three steps when it says:

*The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart.*

*In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path, we must assimilate it in faith and prayer*

*and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church. Finally, when it comes to making a difficult moral decision it is always helpful to ask:*

- What consequences will my decision have on those around me?
- What if everyone in a similar situation decided as I intend to decide?

### Continue to Seek the Ideal.

It would be wonderful if all of us could fully embrace all the teachings of Christ and his church—the teachings on loving our enemy, on caring for the poor, on justice and sexuality issues, etc. But reality is that sometimes most, if not all, of us can only give an *imperfect response* to the teachings of Christ and his church. In all this it is important that we do not allow our imperfect response to become the new norm or ideal for future behavior and moral decision-making. The good and sincere catholic always keeps the values of the gospel and the teachings of the church as the ideals which he/she seeks to embrace even if we fall short of keeping them again and again. In other words, we should not set for ourselves moral norms and ideals that are less than those proposed by the Gospel and the church.

Have a blessed week,

