

Going God's Way

The Church's Teaching on Moral Conscience

ISSUE: What does the Church teach concerning moral conscience?

DISCUSSION: Moral conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. It is there that "man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey" (*Gaudium et Spes* 16). In his conscience, man not only discovers the natural law (cf. Rom. 2:15) but encounters God Himself, the author of the law.

While the natural law written on our hearts teaches us the general, objective principles of the moral life, conscience applies the natural law to particular circumstances, enabling us to choose what is good and avoid what is evil (cf. Catechism, no. 1777).

While all of us have the right and duty to follow our consciences, it is likewise true that our consciences must be correctly formed, and that is truly a lifelong task.

In the formation of conscience, the Word of God is the light for our path (cf. Ps. 119:105); we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice (cf. Catechism, no. 1785). Further, in forming our consciences, we must be "guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church" (*ibid.*; cf. *Dignitatis Humanae* [DH] 14).

One of the principal documents of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), devoted an entire paragraph (no. 16) to the subject of conscience. It is worth quoting in full:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged (cf. Rom. 2:15-16). His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his 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 (cf. Mt. 22:37-40; Gal. 5:14). Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by the objective standards of moral conduct. Yet it often happens that conscience goes astray through ignorance which it is unable to avoid, without thereby losing its dignity. This cannot be said of the man who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.

Listening to Conscience

Moral conscience, which helps us to make good choices in conformity with God's plan for our lives, is a sign of our tremendous dignity as human persons created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). The Catechism points out, however, that we need "interiority" (i.e., adequate reflection, self-examination, etc.) in order to hear and follow the voice of conscience amidst the many distractions in our lives (cf. Catechism, no. 1779).

Conscience enables us to take responsibility for our actions. The judgment of conscience bears witness to the fact that we have made good choices, but also convicts us when we have made bad choices (i.e., committed sins), leading us to seek forgiveness: "[W]e shall ... reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 Jn. 3:19-20).

The Church has always affirmed that we must not deliberately act against the certain judgment of our consciences (cf. Catechism, nos. 1790, 1800). Saint Bonaventure, the great thirteenth-century Franciscan scholar and doctor of the Church, put it this way:

[C]onscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force.¹

“If your eye is not sound ... how great is the darkness!” (Mt. 6:23)

Yet it does not follow that every judgment of conscience is correct. “Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them” (Catechism, no. 1786). As mentioned in the above quote from Vatican II, it is possible that a judgment of one's conscience may be erroneous through ignorance, and a person may not be at fault for acting on such a judgment. But even if there is no sin, the bad choice is still a disorder, and one must work to correct the errors of moral conscience (*ibid.*, no. 1793).

Further, we are responsible for forming our consciences, allowing God's Word to truly be a light for our path. When we do not respect the dignity of conscience—when we do not seek what is true and good—the conscience becomes increasingly blind and less capable of making sound moral judgments (cf. Mt. 6:22-23; *Veritatis Splendor* [VS] 63).

The Catechism (no. 1792) gives several examples of how conscience can go astray, identifying the following sources of errors of judgment in moral conduct:

- ignorance of Christ and His Gospel
- bad example of others
- enslavement to passions
- mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience
- rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching
- lack of conversion
- lack of charity

Conscience is our personal link to God's law, and it must be distinguished—often with the help of a confessor or spiritual director—from our natural inclinations and “passions.” And deep down we know that as Catholics we are not acting with a “certain” conscience when we make choices known to be at odds with the Church's moral teaching.

It is interesting to note that in discussing the “culture of death” in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (EV) (*The Gospel of Life*), Pope John Paul II also speaks, in an analogous sense, of the “moral conscience of society” (nos. 21-24). He speaks of the eclipse of the sense of God in our society and further teaches that, “when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man” (no. 21). In the area of human life issues such as contraception, abortion, suffering, poverty, euthanasia, etc., we witness on a societal level what happens to an individual who routinely ignores the truth of God and the truth of man: The distinction between good and evil is blurred, and eventually one may call “evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20).

Yet, even in the case of extreme moral corruption on an individual or societal level, the voice of the Lord continues to beckon us to seek reconciliation and a fresh beginning (cf. EV 24).

The Truth That Sets Us Free

Any discussion of conscience has to take truth into account. After all, Jesus came “to bear witness to the truth” (Jn. 18:37). Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae* (no. 8) emphasizes that the aim of religious freedom is to enable people to “form their own judgments in the light of truth.”

But where is truth found? That same Vatican II declaration further provides:

[I]n forming their consciences the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself (DH 14).

Some Catholic commentators assert that a well-formed conscience and official Catholic teaching may come to opposite conclusions in moral matters. This opinion directly contradicts Catechism, no. 2039: “Personal conscience and reason should not be set in opposition to the moral law or the Magisterium of the Church.” A Catholic simply cannot claim to have a well-formed and well-informed conscience if he or she is ignorant of, misunderstands, or rejects outright God’s law and thus commits acts that the Church considers gravely disordered.

One who “disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief” is “sinning against faith” (Catechism, no. 2088). Assuredly, there may be circumstances present that diminish the individual’s guilt, but that is very different from saying that the conscience is well formed.

The Church is not merely one source to be consulted as we form our conscience. The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. If we believe that Jesus is truly God, then we do not “consult” with Him—we follow Him! The Church’s moral teaching is not just something that we can buy into in varying degrees based on our own personal preference. Rather, it is the truth of Jesus Christ that sets us free (cf. Jn. 8:32) and enables us to live fulfilling Christian lives.

We believe with a divine and Catholic faith all that Christ has revealed. Can we deliberately choose to reject any of Christ’s teachings and still call ourselves His disciples (cf. Mt. 7:21)?

“He who does what is true comes to the light” (Jn. 3:21)

In his encyclical on the moral life, *Veritatis Splendor* (Splendor of Truth), Pope John Paul II explains that a correct conscience involves a judgment in accordance with objective truth, while an erroneous conscience involves a judgment that a person subjectively considers to be true, but is not (nos. 62-63).

A good conscience, then, must be attuned to the truth, as found not only through natural law but also through the revealed truths of Jesus Christ as taught by His Church. The education of conscience and the fostering of the virtues is absolutely necessary if we are to be “transformed by the renewal of our minds” (Rom. 12:2; cf. Catechism, nos. 1783-85; VS 64).

Scripture teaches that “to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). We must allow His Word to enlighten our minds and change our hearts. Then, through the grace of Christ and the gifts of His Spirit, we are empowered to lead lives “worthy of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27), making good choices in keeping with our dignity as Christians.

¹ II *Librum Sentent.*, dist. 39, a. 1, q. 3, conclusion: Ed. *Ad Claras Aquas*, II, 907b, as quoted in VS 58 (Vatican translation).

Trust the Church

Trust the Church of God implicitly even when your natural judgment would take a different course from hers and would induce you to question her prudence or correctness. Recollect what a hard task she has; how she is sure to be criticized and spoken against, whatever she does; recollect how much she needs your loyal and tender devotion; recollect, too, how long is the experience gained in 1800 years; and what a right she has to claim your assent to principles which have had so extended and triumphant a trial. Thank her that she has kept the faith safe for so many generations and do your part in helping her to transmit it to generations after you.

—Ven. John Henry Newman (d. 1890)

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Catechism, no. 1792 identifies some causes of errors of judgment when it comes to living a moral, Christian life. Are any of these items present in my own life? Do I understand God's law as a source of freedom or a form of bondage? Do I live as a child of God?
2. The Church emphasizes the importance of having a properly formed conscience. What can I do to help ensure that my conscience is properly formed? (See Catechism, no. 1785.)
3. How would I charitably respond to someone who says, "I'm Catholic, but I disagree with many of the Church's moral teachings. I follow my conscience on the subject of contraception and abortion"?

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