

The Light of Conscience

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. ~ Romans 2:15-16

CONSCIENCE REPRESENTS THE MEETING PLACE between God and each individual person. It is that sanctuary inside each of us to which God brings the light of truth about his law and our existence. This light illuminates the mind and enables us to judge between right and wrong. Perhaps the first thing to underscore is that this law in our conscience helps us become the persons God created us to be and in no way does it infringe on human freedom. Rather, the truth about this law and its fullness revealed in Christ heals the wounds of human nature, perfects freedom, and enables us to make good moral choices. Human dignity resides in the conscience and is safeguarded by the truth with which God endows each of us as a light to guide us through life.

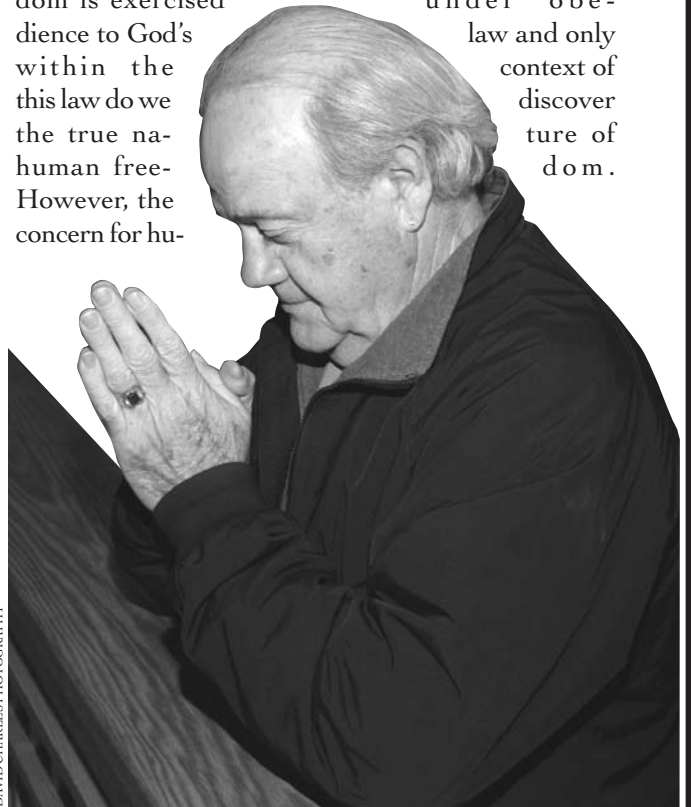
The conscience functions in two ways. First, conscience acts as a witness confronting the person with a law. Because God is the author of this law, conscience is a kind of dialogue with God. Conscience is therefore God's messenger, the voice of God himself who draws the human heart to the truth. The *Catechism* explains that conscience is like a voice: "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, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary"¹ (CCC 1776).

Second, conscience functions as a judge that tells us what we should or should not do, or passes judgment about actions that we have already done. The natural law which, as St. Paul explains, is written on the heart reveals to us the universal and objective norms of morality, and conscience applies this law to the particular actions and determines which

actions conform to this law. Acts of conscience are judgments about the truth of the moral good. In this way, the principles of freedom, truth, and law (as an expression of that truth) are revealed in the context of true judgments. Let us now consider the nature of these principles and their relationships in the context of what we have said about conscience.

Related Principles

Recall the story of creation at the beginning of the Bible. It is there that we discover the meaning of human freedom. Taken from God's freedom, our freedom is exercised under obedience to God's law and only within the context of this law do we discover the true nature of human freedom. However, the concern for hu-



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¹ *Gaudium et Spes* 16

man liberty has led some to deny its dependence on this truth. In this view, freedom becomes a license to do whatever we want, even evil. Such a misunderstanding of freedom only leads to moral blindness, as a person cut off from the light of conscience mistakes evil for good and vice versa. We cannot speak about the freedom of conscience without in the same moment recognizing the obligation we have to know the truth. The great defender of conscience, Ven. John Henry Newman, explained that “conscience has rights because it has duties.”

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Statue of Christ at Loyola Retreat House in Faulkner, Maryland

Furthermore, we need to make clear that exercising one’s conscience presupposes an understanding of God’s law. While we enjoy a freedom in our actions and decisions, such freedom is always exercised in relation to his law that gives us good moral principles on which to act. Although this freedom to act presupposes individual creativity, it does not mean that we create our own moral norms. Rather, in light of the moral norms received through the conscience from God, we creatively discover ways to

act that conform to the truth. A proper understanding of freedom should not be opposed to the truth of moral norms that have been given to protect and promote such freedom. Each person has a right to be respected in his or her own search for the truth but also has a prior duty to seek the truth and assent to it once it is found.

The obligation to exercise our freedom in the light of the truth is expressed most forcefully in Scripture.

Jesus explains that real freedom comes when the truth is accepted. “[Y]ou will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”

(Jn 8:32). Furthermore, Jesus continuously reveals that such freedom is acquired in love. The whole of Christ’s life was spent in self-giving actions that culminated in his supreme gift of himself on the cross. We too have been called to give our lives in service to God and neighbor in communion with Christ.

The Holy Spirit makes possible this gift of self that the law of charity requires. The more we follow this new law, the more we grow in freedom through the service of truth, charity, and justice. The understanding of and obedience to the law of the Spirit ensures both the correct formation of conscience and the realization of authentic freedom.

Formation of Conscience

Forming one’s conscience at times may be difficult, and so Scripture exhorts us to fight the good fight by having “*faith and a good conscience*” (1 Tm 1:19). While we are all born with a conscience, having a good conscience takes effort and help from God. Due to sin, the light of conscience has been clouded and dimmed, making it difficult to discern between right and wrong. To help us, God gave us his Word in Scripture to be a light to our path. But as our experience bears out, Christians who read the Bible interpret it very differently, especially with regard to moral issues. While private study of Scripture should be part of our daily lives, we also must listen to the Church who alone has been entrusted by Christ to authentically interpret Scripture. Magisterial teaching, which comes to us in the form of papal encyclicals, council documents, official catechisms like the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and other writings, helps to explain clearly, authoritatively, and without error the teaching of Christ left to the apostles and preserved in the Sacred Tradition of the Church. Through its service to the revealed

Word and to the Church, the Magisterium in turn serves us by providing an infallible guide to the truth revealed by Christ and enables us to inform our consciences and make good moral choices. In fact, the faithful have a right to instruction in such a way that reason, wounded by sin, can be healed and judgment, impaired by concupiscence, can be purified. We have an obligation to form our consciences so that they accept the Church's teaching for what it truly is, the voice of Christ, gently leading us in right paths.

Another challenge to forming one's conscience is the power of opinion. In today's world, where popular opinion polls determine what is right and wrong, we have to be careful that we form our conscience with the truth and not mere opinion. Opinions sometimes masquerade themselves as judgments of conscience. People may feel strongly about particular issue but have very little grounds to support their positions. They may think they are following their consciences but in reality are only following opinions that have taken possession of their consciences through the influence of television and mass media. A simple way to distinguish between an opinion and the light of conscience is to find out what the Church teaches. The ability to admit mistaken opinions and submit to the teaching of the Church is essential to the formation of conscience. The true conscience is not an opinion, but a dutiful obedience to a divine voice speaking within us. The true conscience opens itself up to the truth and finds its proper dignity in the light of God's law. Discernment between it and mere opinion is important

Educating the conscience takes time and prayer, especially when having a difficult time understanding the Church's teaching, such as in the area of sexual morality where it seems outdated and downright offensive to some. It is an area of life that is so private that some people feel violated and angry when



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Jesus says, *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Mt 11:29-30). Submitting to the Church does not mean forcing the conscience to agree with something it does not yet see. Rather, it means being faithful to the Church, accepting her teachings, and waiting for understanding. Patience, humility, obedience, and prayer are important ingredients during the forming of conscience. If they are present, then the peace and rest that Christ promises will remain even during periods of confusion.

Patients may disagree with their doctors on what would be the right form of treatment for a given disease, but nonetheless trusts their physicians and submit to prescribed therapy even when the patient is unable to see why it is right. The Church, unlike the doctor who is fallible in his or her judgments, has been granted the gift of infallibility and can make infallible statements in the area of faith and morals. She alone dispenses the divine medicine in her teachings and sacraments of the divine Physician, and so she alone can be trusted in her judgments concerning the will of Christ even when the individual Christian cannot at first understand them.

the Church tells them what to do and not to do. Sometimes this anger is a disguise for a guilty conscience because of sins committed that the person knew in his or her heart were wrong. When the rest of the world is saying, “if it feels good, do it,” the Church stands out, sometimes alone, as the only voice proclaiming the truth and the demands of Christian morality. At other times, this anger is a frustration at not being able to get satisfactory answers to one's questions and objections. Wearisome and burdened down by sin and confusion, the Christian should first rekindle his or her faith in the lordship of Christ and submit to the divine authority of the Church. Je-

Conscience and the Virtues

Following the Church's teaching sets the moral boundaries for the conscience and provides a moral compass by which to guide all our actions. But we also need the virtues to assess the particular circumstances and situations of life and ensure that the right judgment of conscience is made and the right action taken. The divine light received in the conscience must become a part of the human conscience and bring about a transformation of the person. A person transformed by the truth is different. Jesus says, "[H]e who does what is true comes to the light" (Jn 3:21). The Christian also acts differently. Each Christian discovers unique ways to express the truth about God's law through his actions. God's law is love and the virtues — most especially the virtue of charity — perfect the Christian in his or her actions that express that love. Does this mean that Christian morality boils down to "doing the loving thing?" If we understand love as intrinsically united with truth, then the answer is yes. But in our day love has been divorced from truth and reduced to a subjective intention. We must clearly understand that "doing the right thing" *is the same as* "doing the loving thing." A well-informed conscience brings to light what is the right thing to do and, with the help of grace and the practice of the virtues, that right choice becomes easier to make.

Following One's Conscience

Every human person has a conscience and with it an obligation to inform it and follow it. To act against one's conscience is wrong when a person is certain in his or her judgment about what he is choosing to do. The obligation to follow the

certain judgment of conscience is binding in all situations and, as the *Catechism* explains, if a person were "deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself" (CCC 1790).

The situation changes when a doubt arises. A doubtful conscience does not bind. A person who is in doubt about the action that he or she is considering should attempt first to resolve the doubt before acting. Such a consideration is not meant to hamper or prevent one from acting but is meant to prevent mistakes when simple deliberation could have resolved the doubt. There are times, especially in medicine, when decisions have to be made in the midst of uncertainties and doubtful results. With the help of prudence and the advice of experts, we can make good moral choices even in these circumstances.

The last situation to address is that of the erroneous conscience. A person who is ignorant about the moral law will make errors in judgments of conscience. The Church teaches that such wrong choices are evil and represent a disorder. However, the person choosing them is not guilty of the evil if two factors are present: 1) the ignorance is invincible, meaning the person has

no means by which to overcome it; and 2) the ignorance is not the result of the individual's own sin or lack of effort to find out the truth. Ignorance of this type may exist, and the Church certainly does not condemn those who are living in such darkness; nonetheless, she does not leave them in that state either. Recognizing that living in the truth opens up the greatest possibility of charity and grace for all, the Church holds out the truth which alone can set us free and give us the fullness of life promised by Christ.

(CCC 1776-1794, 2037, 2039)

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Answering an inner call from God: a man takes vows to enter religious life as a brother