

Role of Conscience

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What Is our Conscience?

“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” (GS 16) [1].

“Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act... In all that he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right” (CCC 1778) [2].

“The dignity of the human person implies and requires uprightness of moral conscience. Conscience includes 1) the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); 2) their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and 3) finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed...” (CCC 1780) [3].

“Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. ‘He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters’” (CCC 1782) [4].

Formation of Conscience

Now we deal with shaping, educating, and forming the conscience. Forming our conscience is a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good (VS 63b) [5]. Recall the three components of conscience. First, we must learn the basic moral principles as known through the natural moral law, through Divine Revelation and by the teachings of the Magisterium. Part III of the CCC is

very useful here. Second, we must learn how to do moral reasoning, how the moral principles apply to various situations in life. We must understand why a good moral principle is objective, consistent, with universal application. We see how they apply even to “hard cases.” Third, when making moral judgments about this particular human act, we are to use good reasoning in conformity with the truth and in pursuit of the good. All three components of the conscience require education, training, practice, and experience.

Very often we do not know what is good for us. Sinful surroundings and our own fallen nature, more prone to sin than to virtue, encourage us to dismiss teaching authority and prefer our own judgment. Formation of conscience helps us see the contrast between our culture and our faith. The faith is to shape the culture, not vice versa (CCC 1793) [6].

Education of the conscience is a lifelong task. It does not stop after Confirmation, or even after graduation from a Catholic college. Life takes us through different stages, all of which are more complex and rich in the mystery of life. New problems arise which require deeper and better applications of the basic moral principles. Papal encyclical and apostolic exhortations are often addressed to the morality of new problems, e.g. *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Evangelium Vitae*, *Veritatis Splendor*. These were written for everyone, not just clerics.

Education of the conscience will also emphasize the role of the virtues and their opposite vices. Human virtues are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good. Human vices surface in the absence of virtue. The seven capital sins provide us with a rich insight into the inclinations of our fallen human nature, the dark side of human nature (CCC 1783) [7].

There are still other components for the formation of conscience. The Word of God is central. God reveals His plan for the human universe through the Sacred Scriptures. We are to interiorize the Gospels and allow them to help guide our choices and acts. We are to put on the mind of Christ, appreciate the beauty of the good, honor the splendor of the truth. Jesus is the Way, the Life and the Truth (Jn 14:6). The Cross is another component of the formation. The only way we overcome the ravages of sin in our lives is through the Cross, the instrument of our redemption. We must accept our share of redemptive

suffering, our share of the work of our salvation. The moral life, the Christian life, demands self-denial, self-discipline, moral exercise. Still other components are: the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the witness and advice of reliable moral guides.

In the Vatican document on Religious Liberty the Church teaches: “In 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) (CCC 1785) [8].

Christian Marriage

God has a plan for marriage. It is a very good plan. Our prophetic/teaching task is to teach God’s plan to our people.

“The intimate partnership of life and the love which constitutes the married state has been established by the creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws; it is rooted in the contract of its partners that is, in their irrevocable personal consent.... This sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone” (GS 48a) [9].

“Married people should realize that in their behavior they may not simply follow their own fancy but must be ruled by conscience – and conscience ought to be in accord with the law of God and the teaching authority of the Church, which is the authentic interpreter of divine law. For the divine law throws light on the meaning of married love, protects it and leads it to truly human fulfillment” (GS 50a) [10].

“But marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children: its nature as an indissoluble covenant between two people and the good of the children demand that the mutual love of the partners be properly expressed, that it should grow and mature” (GS 50b) [11].

“Some of the proposed solutions to these problems are shameful and some people have not hesitated to suggest the taking of life: the Church wishes to emphasize that there can be no conflict between the divine laws governing the transmission of life and the fostering of authentic married love” (GS 51a) [12].

“When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible transmission of life it is not enough to take only the good intention and the evaluation of motives into account: objective criteria must be used, criteria drawn from the nature of the human person and human action, criteria which respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love; all this is possible only if the virtue of married chastity is seriously practiced. In questions of birth regulation the

sons and daughters of the Church, faithful to these principles, are forbidden to use methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the Church in its interpretation of the divine law” (GS 51b) [13].

Since *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) and *Humanae Vitae* (1968), much good writing has been done on the themes of 1) making the gift of self (Law of the Gift), 2) communion of persons, 3) theology of the body, and 4) a Christian personalism. These provide rich veins of insight for priests to mine as they search for better and more penetrating ways to explain the beauty of God’s plan for marriage and spousal love.

Sources:

- *Gaudium et Spes* 48, 50, 51
- *Familiaris Consortio*
- *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, John Paul II (Daughters of St. Paul, Boston: 1997).
- *Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage*, Mary Shivanandam (Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C.: 1999).
- *Why Humanae Vitae was Right: A Reader*, edited by Janet Smith (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1993).

Humanae Vitae

Humanae Vitae presents us with God’s plan for love, life, marriage and family.

Is contraception, sterilization and abortion right or wrong? If wrong, why is it wrong? If seriously wrong, intrinsically evil, then why? We have here a moral absolute, for which there are no exceptions.

“Especially to be rejected is direct abortion – even if done for reasons of health.

“Furthermore, as the Magisterium of the Church has taught repeatedly, direct sterilization of the male or female, whether permanent or temporary, is equally to be condemned.”

“Similarly there must be a rejection of all acts that attempt to impede procreation, both those chosen as means to an end and those chosen as ends. This includes acts that precede intercourse, acts that accompany intercourse, and acts that are directed to the natural consequences of intercourse” (HV 14) [14] (FC 32) [15].

The Winnipeg Statement

Compare this with what the Canadian bishops said in their Winnipeg statement of 27 September 1968:

“#26 Counselors may meet others who, accepting the teaching of the Holy Father, find that because of particular circumstances they are involved in what seems to them a clear conflict of duties, e.g., the reconciling of conjugal love and responsible parenthood with the education of children

already born or with the health of the mother. In accord with the accepted principle of moral theology, if these persons have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives, they may be safely assured that, whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience.”

The Church teaches that the prohibition against artificial contraception is a moral absolute. The Canadian bishops, on the other hand, say that there are circumstances in which the parties may use contraceptives. It is precisely as though they had said, “Canadian Catholics may in some circumstances commit fornication or adultery or sodomy.” “Seems right to him...” We must seek the truth. We do not determine the rightness or wrongness of contraception, sterilization, homosexual acts, fornication or adultery. Only God determines moral principles. Where there is clear teaching by the Church, we must accept that teaching and inform our conscience with that teaching. It is only in gray areas, where there is no clear position taken by the Church, that we must honestly choose the course which seems right, as best we can determine the right.

The way #26 reads, anyone can decide for himself the morality of an act, and then do the act in good conscience. This is not following a well-informed conscience. This is making up my own mind and telling the conscience to accept my decision and come along. This is what Adam and Eve did. But conscience is never a teacher; it is always a pupil.

An erroneous conscience is an erroneous conscience. It is not a correct conscience. There is no moral equivalence between the two. There is no moral equivalence between truth and error, good and evil. A willfully erroneous conscience, where ignorance is not invincible, is objectively wrong and culpable.

If a person tries to keep a moral principle, or moral norm, but fails because of human weakness, we can praise his efforts to keep the moral principle. But we cannot praise his failing, or his offending against the moral principle. Murder is always wrong. Fornication is always wrong. Homosexual acts are always wrong. Contraception is also always wrong.

We do not help a person by attempting to change the moral principles. Rather than lowering the bar of moral standards, we are to encourage others, and ourselves, to measure up to the standard. Moral standards are good for us, not harmful. Physical exercise may be painful and vexing; but it is objectively good for us. Similarly, all moral standards are good for us; troublesome, yes; sometimes difficult, but always good for us.

Source: A Search for the Truth: Did Pope Paul VI Approve the Winnipeg Statement? by Msgr. Vincent Foy (Toronto, Life Ethics Information Centre: 1997)

Follow-up Statement on Conscience by Canadian Bishops

On 12 December 1973 the Canadian Catholic Conference issued their “Statement on the Formation of Conscience.” They gave clarifications and, in effect, moved away from the Winnipeg Statement. However, they have not formally rejected the Winnipeg Statement. A few excerpts of the 1973 document will illustrate their distancing themselves from their 1968 document.

In section #8 there is a recognition of God as a law-giver: “For anyone to accept the idea of conscience, as we here present it, he must begin by agreeing that man is not lord of the universe and that man is subject to a law-giver who is greater than he is. In a word, we must begin with that very first basis of any moral life ... the acceptance of God.”

The document lists three types of conscience: 1) complacent, or lazy in seeking the reasons behind moral norms; 2) excessively dynamic and revolutionary and 3) the Christian conscience. The excessively dynamic conscience is described as “the person who has totally misread the idea that everyone must ultimately be the judge, before God, of his actions and that in the ultimate decision he must make up his own mind. The persons in this category have distorted an appeal to intelligent decision into a destruction of law, objective structures, and have arrived at the conclusion that no one can tell them what to do, including the Church. It is seldom stated this way but it is where this type of exaggerated subjectivism necessarily leads” (# 21).

The ideal Christian conscience “leads us to have a responsible attitude to someone, to Jesus, to the community, to the Church, etc. Every person who fits into this category feels a responsibility for a progressive search and striving to live out a life ideal according to the mind of Christ” (# 22).

With regard to the Magisterium, “to ‘follow one’s conscience’ and to remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the Magisterium. When doubt arises due to a conflict of ‘my’ views and those of the Magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the Magisterium. ‘In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra’ (LG 25) [16]. And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of

individual theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive” (# 41).

Source: Statement on the FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE, issued by the Canadian Bishops (Daughters of St. Paul: 1974).

God Decides What Is Right and Wrong (Veritatis Splendor)

Human freedom is recognized as vitally important for human dignity and human acts. But there are limits to freedom, and these limits are set by the truth. Veritatis splendor [17] explains certain novel interpretations of the relationship of freedom to the moral law, to human nature and to conscience. In the section “Freedom and Law” we find the teaching that only God determines what is right and wrong.

“In the Book of Genesis we read: ‘The Lord God commanded the man, saying, You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die ‘ (Gen 2:16-17).

“With this imagery, Revelation teaches that the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone. The man is certainly free, inasmuch as he can understand and accept God’s commands. And he possesses an extremely far-reaching freedom, since he can eat ‘of every tree of the garden.’ But his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil,’ for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfillment precisely in the acceptance of that law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments” (VS 35) [18].

“In fact, genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good, for his authentic freedom. And this does not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God’s eternal Wisdom, which we have received in Christ, and as a service to man, to the growth of his freedom and to the attainment of his happiness (cf. FC 33-4) [19]” (VS 95b) [20].

God Gives Moral Law to the Church

Christ established the Church to continue His work. The Church is a “sacrament (sign and instrument) of intimate communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (LG 1) [21]. The Church is both a mother and a teacher.

“As Teacher, she never tires of proclaiming the moral norm that must guide the responsible transmission of

life. The Church is in no way the author or the arbiter of this norm. In obedience to the truth which is Christ, whose image is reflected in the nature and dignity of the human person, the Church interprets the moral norm and proposes it to all people of good will, without concealing its demands of radicalness and perfection” (FC 33a) [22].

“As Mother, the Church is close to the many married couples who find themselves in difficulty over this important point of the moral life: she knows well their situation, which is often very arduous and at times truly tormented by difficulties of every kind, not only individual difficulties but social ones as well. She knows that many couples encounter difficulties not only in the concrete fulfillment of the moral norm but even in understanding its inherent values” (FC 33b) [23].

“But it is one and the same Church that is both Teacher and Mother. And so the Church never ceases to exhort and encourage all to resolve whatever conjugal difficulties may arise without ever falsifying or compromising the truth. She is convinced that there can be no true contradiction between the divine law on transmitting life and that on fostering authentic married love (GS 51) [24]. Accordingly, the concrete pedagogy of the Church must always remain linked with her doctrine and never be separated from it. With the same conviction as my predecessor, I therefore repeat: ‘To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls’ (HV 29)” [25] (FC 33c)[26].

The Church as Divine Institution and the Holy Father as Vicar of Christ

We look to the teaching Church for moral guidance. The Church was established by Christ to speak (evangelize) and teach (moral principles) on His behalf. The Church must teach the mind and teachings of Christ. She cannot change, or hide them.

The authority to teach within the Church comes from God. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:18).

The Church teaches with authority in matters of faith and morals. The Faith deals with the twelve articles of the Creed and related matters (Part I of the CCC). Morality deals with the Ten Commandments and related matters (part III of the CCC). Faith pertains to what we believe; morals pertain to what we choose and what we do.

Teaching authority is vested most especially in Peter and his successors. “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church. Whatsoever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven...” (Mt 16:18-19). “He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me. And he who

rejects me, rejects him who sent me” (Lk 10:16). Peter does not act or teach on his own authority, but on that of Christ. Peter does not establish the moral law; only Christ can do that. Peter does not add to or subtract from the moral law. He can only teach what he knows to be true, as taught and revealed to him by the Holy Spirit.

The Magisterium, both ordinary and extraordinary, is a great blessing for us. By it we know that we are informing our conscience with true moral principles. We can put on the mind of Christ. We can know the good and do it. We can recognize evil and resist it.

Pastoral Obligation to Preach the Truth

“It is your great and manifest mission, and we address especially those of you who are moral theologians – to promote completely and clearly the teachings of the Church concerning marriage. ... It is of the utmost importance for safeguarding the peace of souls and the unity of the Christian people, that in moral as in dogmatic matters, all should obey the Magisterium of the Church and should speak with one voice. ... We call upon you again with whole heart: ‘I beg you brothers through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: that you might all speak as one and that there might be no division among you: that you may be united in the same mind and the same judgment’ (1 Cor 1:10)” (HV 28a) [27].

“Refusal to compromise anything concerning the saving doctrine of Christ is an outstanding act of charity to souls; yet at the same time it is necessary always to combine this with tolerance and charity. ... Therefore, let spouses in their times of trouble find in the speech and hearts of their priests the image of the voice and love of our Redeemer” (HV 29a) [28].

“So, beloved Sons, preach with full confidence and be certain that the Holy Spirit of God, who guides the Magisterium in its teaching, will illuminate the hearts of the faithful and invite them to give their assent. Teach spouses the indispensability of prayer; instruct them properly so that they may come regularly and with great faith to the sacraments of the Eucharist and of penance and that they may never become discouraged because of their weakness” (HV 29c) [29].

Papal Directives to Do More

On 2 October 1999 Pope John Paul II addressed U.S. Bishops from California, Nevada and Hawaii who were making their ad limina visit to Rome. He encouraged them in these words: “As bishops, together with your priests, deacons, seminarians and other pastoral personnel, you must find the right language and imagery to present the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* in a comprehensive and compelling way.”

The context of this statement is the following: “Give couples the Church’s full teaching on procreation.”

“We are coming to the end of a century which began with confidence in humanity’s prospects of almost unlimited progress, but which is now ending in widespread fear and moral confusion. If we want a springtime of the human spirit, we must rediscover the foundations of hope. Above all, society must learn to embrace once more the great gift of life, to cherish it, to protect it and to defend it against the culture of death, itself an expression of the great fear that stalks our times. One of your most noble tasks as Bishops is to stand firmly on the side of life, encouraging those who defend it and building with them a genuine culture of life.

“The Second Vatican Council was quite aware of the forces shaping contemporary society when it spoke out clearly in defense of human life against the many threats facing it (cf. GS 27) [30]. The Council also made a priceless contribution to the culture of life by its eloquent presentation of the full meaning of married love (cf. GS 48-51)[31]. Following the lead of the Council and expounding its teaching, Pope Paul VI wrote the prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which he addressed the moral implications of the power to co-operate with the Creator in bringing new life into the world. The Creator has made man and woman to complement one another in love, and their union is no less a sharing in the creative power of God himself. Conjugal love serves life not only insofar as it generates new life but also because, rightly understood as the total gift of spouses to one another, it shapes the loving and caring context in which new life is wholeheartedly welcomed as a gift of incomparable value.

“Thirty years after *Humanae Vitae*, we see that mistaken ideas about the individual’s moral autonomy continue to inflict wounds on the consciences of many people and on the life of society. Paul VI pointed out some of the consequences of separating the unitive aspect of conjugal love from its procreative dimension: a gradual weakening of moral discipline; a trivialization of human sexuality; the demeaning of women; marital infidelity, often leading to broken families; State sponsored programs of population control based on imposed contraception and sterilization (HV 17) [32]; the introduction of legalized abortion and euthanasia, ever increasing recourse to in vitro fertilization, and certain forms of genetic manipulation and embryo experimentation are also closely related in law and public policy, as well as in contemporary culture, to the idea of unlimited dominion over one’s body and life.

“The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* honors married love, promotes the dignity of women and helps couples grow in understanding the truth of their particular path to holiness. It is also a response to contemporary society’s temptation to reduce life to a commodity. As bishops, together with your priests, deacons, seminarians and other pastoral personnel, you must find the right language and

imagery to present the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* in a comprehensive and compelling way. Marriage preparation programs should include an honest and complete presentation of the Church's teaching on responsible procreation, and should explain the natural methods of regulating fertility, the legitimacy of which is based on respect for the human meaning of sexual intimacy. Couples who have embraced the teaching of Pope Paul VI have discovered that it is truly a source of profound unity and joy, nourished by their increased mutual understanding and respect; they should be invited to share their experience with engaged couples taking part in marriage preparation programs."

Source: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 7 October 1998, p.5

References

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