

THE ROLE OF THE 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, 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. 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. (*GS*, #16)

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. (*GS*, #16)

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. (*GS*, #16)

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 conformed to the law of God in the light of 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*, #50)

Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking. (*CCC*, #1777)

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognized the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law. (*CCC*, #1778)

Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; I mean that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise....[Conscience] is a messenger of him, who both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ. (*CCC*, #1778)

It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection:

Return to your conscience, question it....turn inward, brethren, and in everything you do, see God as your witness. (CCC, #1779)

The dignity of the human person implies and requires uprightness of moral conscience. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and formed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment. (CCC, #1780)

Conscience enables one to assume responsibility for the acts performed. If man commits evil, the just judgment of conscience can remain within him as the witness to the universal truth of the good, at the same time as the evil of his particular choice. The verdict of the judgment of conscience remains a pledge of hope and mercy. In attesting to the fault committed, it calls to mind the forgiveness that must be asked, the good that must still be practiced, and the virtue that must be constantly cultivated with the grace of God:

We shall...reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (CCC, #1781)

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)

Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings. (CCC, #1783)

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. (CCC, #1784)

In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our paths 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. (CCC, #1785)

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. (CCC, #1786)

Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law. (CCC, #1787)

To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. (CCC, #1788)

Some rules apply in every case:

- One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
- the Golden Rule: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."
- charity always proceeds by way of respect for one's neighbor and his conscience: "Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience...you sin against Christ." Therefore "it is right not to...do anything that makes your brother stumble." (CCC, #1989)

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed. (CCC, #1790)

This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "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." In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits. (CCC, #1791)

Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct. (CCC, #1792)

If - on the contrary - the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience. (CCC, #1793)

A good and pure conscience is enlightened by true faith, for charity proceeds at the same time "from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by objective standards of moral conduct. (CCC, #1794)

Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act. (CCC, #1796)

For the man who has committed evil, the verdict of his conscience remains a pledge of conversion and of hope. (CCC, #1797)

A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. Everyone must avail himself of the means to form his conscience. (CCC, #1798)

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. (CCC, #1799)

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. (CCC, #1800)

Conscience can remain in ignorance or make erroneous judgments. Such ignorance and errors are not always free of guilt. (CCC, #1801)

The Word of God is a light for our path. We must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. This is how moral conscience is formed. (CCC, #1802)

Closely connected with the formation of conscience is the work of education, which helps individuals to be ever more human, leads them ever more fully to the truth, instills in them growing respect for life and trains them in right interpersonal relationships. (EV, #97)

The formation of conscience requires being enlightened about the truth and God's plan and must not be confused with a vague subjective feeling or with personal opinion. (PCF, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family*, December 8, 1995, #95)

One must keep in mind that the formation of consciences is to be accomplished above all in catechesis for married couples, both general or specific, it is always necessary to assist the spouses, also in the moment of the sacrament of Reconciliation, to examine themselves on the specific duties of conjugal life. (PCF, *Vademecum for Confessors: Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life*, February 12, 1997, 3;7)

The Church's magisterium does not replace people's moral conscience. It helps it to be formed, to discover the truth about things, the mystery and vocation of the human person,

the profound meaning of his or her actions and relations. Thus conscience can never give way to acting arbitrarily. It can err by orienting itself toward what reasonably seems to be something good, but its duty is to orient itself toward the good according to truth. (John Paul II, *Discourse to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family: Christian Doctrine Concerning Marriage and the Family*, December 13, 1985, #2)