

Chapter Three – Conscience: Being True to Our Deepest Self

I. The Nature of Conscience

Conscience is what represents our dignity and integrity as persons. When someone follows their conscience, often with great cost to self, we refer to them as a hero or heroine. (Joseph Schultz, Thomas Moore, Oscar Romero, the three nuns and one laywoman in El Salvador, Cesar Chavez)

We are challenged to be true to our conscience because of our Christian view of morality – *and remember, that view always has a social dimension!!*

A. *The Question of Conscience*

The term conscience has been flooded with different meanings and interpretations.

- Some of us feel that conscience is the *small inner voice* in our hearts or heads (watching too many Pinocchio films with Jiminy Cricket!),
- or we feel that our conscience is what has been drummed in our heads from our parents and other authority figures, i.e., our *upbringing*,
- finally, we understand conscience as a *deep-seated feeling* within that we have done something wrong.

One way to grasp conscience is to see it as “moral decision making involving awareness that there is right and wrong, a process of discernment, and finally judgment.”

B. *Conscience in Popular Usage*

Let us take a closer look at the three ideas of conscience that have been expressed above.

Conscience as an “Inner Voice”

One of the major drawbacks of this understanding of conscience is that we see and understand our conscience as separate from ourselves. Conscience is not apart from us, *it is not something we have, but rather something we are*.

If we take this position, we will probably find ourselves believing that our conscience somehow forms itself and all we have to do is figure out what it is telling us to do. In a sense we will leave our conscience untouched, unexamined, and undeveloped. This is a very common and unhealthy way to view conscience. You can see that if one takes this position then one sees no personal responsibility for educating and developing one’s own conscience.

Conscience as “Our Upbringing”

All of us were given hundreds, if not thousands of messages as we have grown up telling us how to act and/or what is right or wrong. These messages are like tapes in our heads that we play whenever certain stimuli occur, for example:

- “Don’t walk through that mess you will get dirty and that is bad!”
- “You don’t want to be overweight and out of shape, put down that cookie!”
- “Yes, that person looks different from you, but that doesn’t make you better than they are.”

What we learn when we look at these messages is that our conscience has a cultural and community dimension – family, relatives, Church, school, country – all have an impact on what we come to believe is right or wrong. Since these messages are from our childhood, they are deeply ingrained in our minds and to

think differently, or violate their message is psychologically jarring and disturbing.

Many of these messages and tapes are actually quite good and helpful to our lives. We do not want to think that all of the information given to us by our family, friends, Church, etc., is inaccurate. However, there is a very important caveat (caution): *ALL OF THE MESSAGES IN OUR HEADS MUST BE EXAMINED CRITICALLY, EVALUATED, AND THEN EITHER KEPT OR DISCARDED*. Our conscience is not a blank board (*tabula rasa*, as posited by Aristotle, Aquinas, and most recently, John Locke) to be written on, but an active faculty of our minds that is to be educated, updated, and shaped according to our faith and belief.

C. A Feeling

There is an upside and a downside to the concept that conscience is a deep feeling inside of me that I have done something right or wrong, or as we often refer to this feeling – **guilt**.

If upon examination of what I have done or failed to do, it becomes clear that I acted in a way that was wrong, or I failed to act when I should have, then we are faced with *healthy guilt*. In psychology, healthy guilt is something we should feel and need to feel when we do something wrong. To have no guilt feelings when we have acted in an immoral fashion indicates one is either amoral, or worse yet, sociopathic – that is – having no feelings of right or wrong about anything!

On the other hand, there are those times when we have a deep-seated feeling of guilt and in fact, we have done nothing wrong. (Take some time to think of all of the rules and regulations that you have been taught that actually offer little or no indication about your being a moral or immoral person, e.g., you got dirty and that's bad; you actually talked and laughed in Church, I guess you don't love or respect God!, etc. In these cases, we have what psychologists call, *unhealthy guilt*, or guilt that we should not feel in the first place.

The job we all have is to once again critically examine our guilt feelings, accept those that are calling us to a deeper level in the moral life, and reject those that are simply the tapes in our head that need to be erased.

II. Root Meaning of Conscience: An Action, Not a Thing

By looking at the etymology of the word conscience, that is, that the root of the word conscience comes from the Latin root for the active verb, to know, we find two important things:

- originally conscience deals with the concept of *knowing*
- the word conscience implies that which is *active*, not *passive*

Therefore, we can redefine for ourselves conscience as our acts of judging that are based on our knowledge of right and wrong.

Upon further examination of the word conscience we also realize that it has a connection with the words *consciousness* and *conscientious*.

We might look at it in this way, the more one is aware of what is going on around oneself (*consciousness*), the more one can live one's life responsibly and with the solid intention of making good, sound moral decisions (*conscientiousness*), thus making for a well formed and active *conscience*. In short, the whole of our conscience is much greater than the sum of all of the parts that make it up.

III. Three Dimensions of Conscience

If one is to have an active and developed conscience then one must cultivate all three dimensions of one's conscience:

- **Awareness:** one must be aware of what is going on around oneself and within oneself ("Pay attention to yourself."). This is also referred to as simply being conscious of one's surroundings and the events in one's world.
- **Developing and Educating:** one must then look at all that is happening within one's world and examine what it may mean and what possible options are available that will allow one to make a moral response.
- **Act with Judgment:** finally, one must take all of the information that has been gathered in step two and make a decision that seems the most enlightened and the most moral.

Now let's take a closer look at each of the elements of conscience cited above.

A. Awareness: Taking Seriously Our Capacity to Seek the Good

The first truth we realize about being aware and conscious is that all of our actions have consequences for good or ill. Only when one is willing to accept this fact and realize that there is a right and wrong from which one must choose can conscience begin to form and affect us.

Unfortunately there are those who have either a *lax conscience (one who is lazy and unwilling to work through the difficult and demanding process of a well formed conscience)* or no conscience (*the psychopath or sociopath*) at all will not be acting in a way that is reflected by one with a well developed and educated conscience.

This is why it is so critical for all of us to pay attention, stay aware, work at developing our conscience, rather than retreating into some juvenile, or worse yet infantile attitude that simply says, "*This stuff is too hard - I just want to have fun!*"

B. Development: Enhancing Our Capacity to Know and to Choose the Good

Our conscience is of little or no use to us if it is not **informed**. An informed conscience works to know all of the variables for any given moral decision and is educated in matters of Church teaching, legal issues, etc. Decisions made from a conscience that is uninformed will be poor decisions. We cannot operate on the premise that, "ignorance is bliss," that is, as long as I do not know anything I cannot be held responsible.

The Catechism of our Church calls us to follow the light of God's Word for the path that will inform our conscience. Elements that should be a part of any informed conscience include:

- Sacred Scriptures\
- Church teachings
- advice from others
- openness to the Holy Spirit in prayer

Remember, knowledge equals responsibility, and we are called to be knowledgeable. Ignorance is no excuse!!

C. Judgment: Making Choices Based on Our Awareness of the Good

The goal of an informed conscience is not to remain inactive or only in our thoughts, but rather, it is to lead to judgment and action in our lives.

It is good to remember that all of the judgments that we make will not always be correct or even moral. There are times when the process of educating our conscience is not complete, or it is simply wrong in its conclusion. In such an instance, we speak of one having an *erroneous conscience*. A conscience that remains ignorant or uneducated will make many erroneous decisions and judgments. *In such instances, it is critical that we are open to the advice of others and also to "hindsight" so we can see where we were wrong. Without this openness we will simply be doomed to live in our ignorance.*

There are also those cases where we are informed and our conscience is right but we simply do not heed what our conscience is telling us to do. In such an instance we are going against our educated conscience and this is called **SIN**.

IV. Conscience in Christian Tradition

Keeping in mind that we are a Church community of believers and that we were baptized into a community of believers - we must realize that the formation of our conscience does not happen in a vacuum. We need the wisdom and guidance of others - the collected wisdom of the ages - to help us discern the truth and act accordingly.

A. Conscience in Scripture - Knowing of the Heart

In the Scriptures the most common reference to that which we may see as conscience are the references to the heart. The heart in Scripture means the entire person, not just an organ. We are called to live conscientious lives, which reflect goodness and love naturally to others. When our hearts are not formed toward God we are called to repent and become reconciled.

The other dimension that the Scriptures make clear is that conscience is not an isolated aspect of who we are. Conscience must be an activity of our whole person - heart and mind alike.

B. *Conscience in Church Teaching: Does the Church Say, “Follow Your Conscience”?*

When the Church asks us to follow our conscience, the Church is always implying that we are following an informed conscience. It is our duty to work and educate ourselves in all ways necessary so we have an informed conscience.

The Catechism of our Church says it clearly, “In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right.” #1778

On page 54 of our text it clearly states the answers to three questions:

- Are we called to live according to our conscience? *Yes, but it should be an informed conscience.*
- Should we think out our decisions to avoid acting on blind obedience or whim and feeling? *Absolutely, and this is in what we mean by developing genuine character – you will automatically act in accord with your informed conscience instead of blind obedience or whim!*
- Should we act in accord with our conscience in moral decision making? *Again, absolutely – and the Church has always maintained that one is obligated to follow an informed conscience – even if it goes against the Church.*
 - *But remember, you are to follow your conscience after you have made every effort to be informed on our Church’s teachings and the reason for those teachings. Simply disagreeing because these teachings are inconvenient to you is not what it means to follow an informed conscience!! Someone who does not go to mass on Sunday because they do not think they need to may very well not be following an informed conscience.*

C. *The Second Vatican Council on Conscience*

The clearest manifestation of our Church’s respect and concern for the dignity and freedom of all people’s conscience is found in the Documents of Vatican II. Be sure to acquaint yourself with the references in our text, especially all of the references on page 55 to either the Catechism or the document, “Of Human Dignity,” written at Vatican II. (*Pay special attention to the chart on the top of page 55.*)

When one realizes the work of the Church to protect and strengthen the individual conscience of all humans one no longer operates in the ignorance that the Church doesn’t care what I think, but only that I do what they say.

D. *Pope John Paul II on Conscience*

Pope John Paul II challenges us to avoid a “cafeteria mentality” when approaching issues of conscience and morality. The Pope is concerned with

the issue of relativity and individuals making conscience choices in a vacuum. We are inspired by the Holy Spirit, called to follow Jesus, a community, a Church, and all of these must be considered when I make a moral decision.

The Pope raises four concerns for fashioning our conscience:

- Conscience should never be separated from the inspiration of Jesus.
- There is always a community dimension to conscience (*no one in this class should find this new – the individual Christian is an OXYMORON!!*)
- As a Catholic, Catholic teaching and tradition holds a privileged position in offering us moral guidance, i.e., know what the Church has said in the past and why.
 - **N.B.** *Would you start making decisions about what college you are going to attend, what your major will be, etc., without taking the time to know what will be best for you and what is true about each university you are considering? You would talk to others, see what the university has to say, get advice from those who went there. The same is true in moral decisions for the Catholic – you are not starting from zero, nor are you creating the wheel – much has been thought and proclaimed on moral issues long before you or I began thinking about them. In humility know your limits and take the time to know your tradition!*

Still wondering what you should take into consideration if you are going to genuinely follow your conscience according to your baptismal commitment – then take a look at the chart on the bottom of page 56. Of course you cannot remember all of these for now – but that is the purpose of “muscle memory,” or developing character. Once you develop your character in the light of the Holy Spirit these all will come naturally! HONEST!!

V. Conscience and Moral Maturity

Clearly one's informed conscience is dependent upon one's maturity in general, and certainly one's moral maturity. There are different interpretations of what it means to be morally mature, but two of the most noted are Lawrence Kohlberg's Levels of Moral Maturity (read carefully the definitions of *The Pre-Conventional Level*, *The Conventional Level*, and *The Post Conventional Level*, described on page 57 of your text.)

A. *Are There Different Ways to Be Morally Mature?*

As any good critical thinker should do one should ask the question – “Is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory the only way to approach moral maturity?”

If one does this some questions arise:

- Why does Kohlberg not address the question of moral maturity in light of the conclusions one reaches in any moral decision instead of only in light of which level they are on when they make their decision? (*Okay, critical thinkers – what is one of the problems Kohlberg may have been trying to avoid by*

dodging this issue. I may ask you to comment on this on a half sheet of paper so give it some thought.)

- Kohlberg's theory was fashioned by only interviewing males – ouch, you bad boy Kohlberg!! So Carol Gilligan saves the day by pointing out something Kohlberg missed in his all male sample, that is, women do not think like men (*okay, Carol, tell us more since all of us males at Lourdes already know this!!*)

What Gilligan noted was that men tend to evaluate moral decisions based on *abstract ideas or principles, e.g., the law says we cannot do something, Whereas women are much more prone to evaluating a moral decision based on its effect upon others and the relations of all involved, for example, it may be right for us to go to war in principle, but many innocent people will die, such as the elders, women and children, so war is a bad idea even if it seems just.*

VI. Conclusion

God has given us many gifts, but paramount to all of our gifts is our freedom as it is manifested through our conscience. This gift is for the good of the community and we are to act out of an informed conscience so we can continue the *building of the Kingdom of God!*

Consequently, since we all want to be close to God, live lives worthy of who we are, and make the world a better place, there is no better place to start than by cultivating an educated and informed conscience. You are a Christian Catholic adult and therefore:

- it is no longer sufficient to operate in ignorance of the movement of the Holy Spirit in your life as discerned in your prayer
- you are called to be aware of Church teachings and how they impact what we believe
- you need to be aware of the “goings on” in the world so your decisions are based on what is for the common good, not only one person or even one country
- you, like all of us, are called to be in genuine conversation with other believers so together we can better discern the truth of our faith (that includes believers who disagree with you and your interpretation of any of the above elements like movement of the Holy Spirit, Church teaching, etc.)

What could be more important than growing in your knowledge and love of God? NOTHING!! This being true, then the greatest gift you can give yourself in an effort to know God better is to inform, educate, and act out of your conscience. AMEN!