**Moral Conscience & Conscience Formation**

Understanding conscience is essential for the life of faith. A solid grasp of Catholic teaching about conscience makes it possible to live a moral life. And sadly…a defective understanding can destroy your moral life.

This is important: conscience may be the single most ***misunderstood*** issue among Catholics today!

**A natural facility to judge**

Conscience is a natural facility of our reason that does three things:

1. Reminds us always to do good and avoid evil.
2. Makes a judgment about the good and evil of particular choices in a specific situation.
3. Bears witness after the fact to the good or evil that we have done. (I.e., having a guilty conscience.)

Conscience is a powerful and remarkable facility that is distinctly *human*.

Understand that conscience is a judgment of reason. It uses the objective principles of the moral law to judge the morality of acts in specific circumstances. Conscience is not itself the source of the moral law.

This is a common point of misunderstanding. Many who reject Church teaching will say, “I’m just following my conscience.” What they usually mean is that they’re looking to their conscience as the source of moral principles, which is a serious error.

It’s likely that some other Catholics will challenge you on this point, and you’ll have to defend it; (people have been taught weak or bad doctrine for many years….)

Pope John Paul II’s *Veritatis Splendor* contains a definitive discussion about conscience in sections 54-64; number 64 particularly speaks to this point.

Everyone has a duty to form their conscience. Formation of conscience simply means educating and training it. We do this by learning and taking to heart the objective moral law, as found in Scripture and the authoritative teachings of the Catholic Church. This forms conscience in objective moral truth as taught by Christ and his Church.

Practicing the virtues is another aspect of forming the conscience. This not only lets us do good acts, but it trains the will to desire to do good. In particular, the virtue of prudence affects the ability of conscience to judge rightly.

**You must follow your conscience**

A fundamental principle of Catholic morality is that you must *follow your conscience*.

But be careful: there’s a strong tendency for all of us to distort the full meaning of that principle! We tend to use it as a giant loophole for doing any old thing that we’d like.

A well-formed conscience will never contradict the objective moral law, as taught by Christ and his Church.

A safe way to read this principle is: if your conscience is well-formed, and you are being careful to reason clearly and objectively from true moral principles, then you must follow the reasoned judgment of your conscience about the morality of a specific act. Otherwise, seek reliable guidance in forming your conscience.

**The principle that we must follow our conscience derives from…**

**The dignity of conscience:**

The authority of conscience, and our need to follow it, come from its dignity.

Pope John Paul II tells us that conscience is an “interior dialog of man with himself” about right and wrong. It “is also a dialog of man with God”: it is “the witness of God himself” calling him to obey the moral law, and is a person’s “witness of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness.” This is the basis of the great dignity of the conscience: it derives from its witness to objective moral truth. (Veritatis Splendor, 57-58, 60)

Conscience is the means God has given us to make moral decisions. Our freedom demands that we use it: “When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.”

But we compromise this dignity of conscience if we haven’t formed our conscience well, or when we do not take care to reason clearly and objectively. Again, Pope John Paul II teaches:

Jesus alludes to the danger of the conscience being deformed when he warns: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Mt 6:22-23). (Veritatis Splendor, 63)

**Erroneous judgment**

Conscience does not always judge properly. Out of ignorance or bad reasoning, it can judge wrongly. Erroneous judgment is often our own fault, and can have many causes:

* Lack of care in forming our conscience or our powers of reason
* Misunderstanding conscience
* Damage caused by repeated and habitual sin
* Following the bad example of others
* Rejection of Church teaching
* Ignorance of Christ and the Gospels
* Neglecting the work of our conversion to Christ
* Neglect of charity

If our conscience errs and we’re responsible for the error, then we are guilty of the evil committed. We are not guilty for the evil if we’re not responsible for the error.

But even if the guilt is not imputable to us, it’s still an evil act. This greatly hinders our ability to advance in the moral life and live in union with God. As Pope John Paul II puts it:

The performance of good acts… constitutes the indispensable condition of and path to eternal blessedness…. Only the act in conformity with the good can be a path that leads to life…. If [an act is not good]…, the choice of that action makes our will and ourselves morally evil, thus putting us in conflict with our ultimate end, the supreme good, God himself. (Veritatis Splendor, 72, emphasis in the original)

**The key to the moral life**

The good or evil of specific acts shapes our whole life.

We choose God or reject him specifically in the morality of our actions. We must choose to do good in order to choose God, grow in freedom, sanctify ourselves, and let God’s grace work in us to make us “children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.”

Moral conscience is the key that makes this moral life possible: it is exactly how we know what the good is in specific cases, and it beckons us to always choose the good. And even when we choose wrongly, conscience calls us to seek God’s merciful forgiveness so that we can begin again.