

PASTORAL LETTER
THE MORAL CONSCIENCE
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INTRODUCTION

There are those who view the moral conscience as personal, internal, subjective and open to no criticism from without. Even in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* one might think to find justification for such an outlook. There we read: “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.’”¹

The problem with an overly subjective outlook is that it misses the point. It does not look at the whole question of conscience, just as this quotation from the catechism would not be properly understood if it were left standing by itself without seeing it in conjunction with the paragraphs that surround it.

The proper understanding of the moral conscience is basic to our understanding of morality and to the living of our lives. I would like, therefore, in this letter to address some of the most important aspects of conscience with the hope that a clearer understanding of them will also result in a deeper appreciation of what a gift conscience is and why we must, for our own eternal happiness, attend to its proper formation.

I. THE QUESTION: “*Where are you?*” (Gen 3:9)

Can we really know the difference between right and wrong? Fifty years ago that would have been a question easily answered. Now it may be hotly debated or simply dismissed. In one sense the explanation is as old as humanity. We were created in the image of God (Gen 1-2) and were called to know the truth and to live in love. Yet, our first parents disobeyed God and introduced sin into the world, thus depriving the intellect of an easy grasp of truth and constancy of will in living the good (Gen 3). Created for communion with God and with one another in truth and love, Adam and Eve chose instead to decide for themselves what would be right and what would be wrong, and so they (and in them all of us) began to hide from God.

The consequence of that choice is mutual recrimination (“The woman made me do it...,” “The serpent tricked me...”), self-disillusionment and even death — consequences which we know all too well. But God does not abandon Adam and Eve to their lie. Instead, he seeks them out: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9-) Fifty years ago it was every bit as possible as it is now to choose wrong rather than right and try to justify oneself for doing so, but fifty years ago it was also easier to know and agree on the difference between right and wrong. At that time we still

shared cultural values about the truth of the natural moral law. What is “new” today is that now the very idea of knowing right and wrong is called into question.

This questioning of the truth of right and wrong, the questioning even of the possibility of knowing anything to be certain, leads to what we call “relativism.” It has been creeping up on us for centuries, gradually changing the way we think about ourselves and our world. The Scientific Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment — not to mention religious wars and persecutions — were among the catalysts that led intellectuals in the Western world to question the shared philosophies of our ancestors and the theological foundations of Greek and Judaeo-Christian thought. Such questions fostered a tendency to think it better to be “modern” than to be “ancient,” even though to classify an idea as “modern” or “ancient” tells us nothing about whether it is true or false.

This is not to disparage advances in the modern world. We have gained a greater respect for the freedom of the human person. There have been wonderful medical and technological advances. Ideas both democratic and scientific have benefitted all of us. At the same time, the lack of a common intellectual and moral sense has contributed to a century of totalitarianism and materialism which converged to wreak havoc on all peoples and on the world we share. The result, however, has been more than a matter of global movements. On the smaller scale these notions (which inevitably involve lies about God and man) are the basis also of individual moral decisions and values. Over time they have fostered a moral culture which prizes personal autonomy and subjective determination of good above all else, creating a world of “merely individualistic morality”²

This sort of subjectivism leads to the notion that things are good or bad because they do or do not suit *my* preferences, because they are or are not in accord with what I think is best *for me* — almost like deciding what sort of car to drive or what sort of music to enjoy. Of course, preferences have a valid part to play in our lives, but mere self-centered choices will never serve as a basis for true fulfillment or as a way of serving the common good.

This is not a difficult idea to grasp. In fact, all of us (even children) make use of it all the time in our daily relations with each other.³

“You’re not being fair!” “You promised.” “Excuse me, but you’re in my seat.” “He was nice to you. Shouldn’t you be nice to him?” Every one of these statements, commonplace as they are, reveals something far deeper at work here. They all make sense only if the speaker is right in supposing that the listener and he share a common standard upon which both of them can and should agree — a standard of fairness or of honesty to which both of them are bound and which both should recognize. In fact, even when we don’t agree with what the speaker wants, we still are prone to try to justify ourselves on the ground of some exception to the standard rather than by simply denying the standard itself. There is an implication here of something outside of both speaker and listener, some reality that both subscribe to and which both consider important to the relationships of daily life. Indeed, that same standard is present in far greater things than the small examples I have chosen to give.

We have here a standard that we do not “make up” for ourselves, as though conscience were purely private and personal. It is an objective standard that we *discover*, not a subjective one that we *manufacture*. If we want to live in a society that respects the dignity of all persons, then it is in our interest to take a strong look at the objectivity of what is good or bad, right or wrong for *all* of us. To avoid the question of objective truth only pretends to allow subjectivity to reign and individualism to be sovereign, and even our simple examples show what an impossible world that would create. In such a world raw power would be decisive and pleasure would become the principle of action. But to choose such a world is to choose to act against our truest selves and against our deepest desire to love and be loved.

We must ask ourselves the question God asked of Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” Do you accept the truth? Do you live in real love? The implications are enormous, because love fosters life and sin fosters death. If we are not building a community of love, then we are fostering what Pope John Paul II called a culture of death, a totally inhospitable place in which to live.⁴ But there is another way to live: There is the truth that leads to life.

II. TRUTH, CHRIST, CHURCH: “*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*” (Jn 14:6)

At supper with his friends on the night before his death, Jesus, fully aware of all that was about to happen, rose from the table, set aside his outer garments and fastened a towel around his waist. Then he filled a bowl with water and began to wash his disciples’ feet.⁵

“Do you realize what I have done for you,”⁶ he asked them after he had finished. If he, their master and teacher, washed their feet like a common servant, then they must do likewise for each other. “I give you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples — if you have love for one another.”⁷

Jesus desires to share with his disciples the love that he shares with the Father, and he does so by an action of pure service, an act of witness to the fulness of his love. This love is no mere feeling, no noble or touching sentiment. It is a commitment, a choice to place oneself at the disposal of the other. It is demanding, so demanding that — as Good Friday proved — it will suffer death rather than fail in its commitment. It is a love almost frightening in its fidelity to the truth.

Truth is at the heart of it all. “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”⁸ But even for Jesus the truth is not simply his, not simply subjective. “The words that I speak to you, I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works.”⁹ It is this truth of the Father that the disciples must come to learn and appreciate. That will happen through the Advocate, the Helper, the Spirit of Truth: “The Holy Spirit which the Father will send in my place will teach you everything and remind you of everything that I have told you.”¹⁰ It is the Holy Spirit who insures that the disciples — the Church — will remain in union with Jesus, who is “the way and the truth and the life,”¹¹ and will continue to teach the truth that sets us free.

Truth is essential in our relationship to God and to each other. The foolishness of what we have referred to as relativism is in the fact that it tries to accept everything as possibly true and ends up accepting nothing as actually true. Listen to the exchange between Jesus and Pilate. Jesus said, “For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”¹² And all that Pilate could respond was, “What is truth?” And he went back out to try to sway the mob to spare Jesus, without the courage of truth to enable him to act on his own, free of the fear of Caesar that might have truly set Pilate free had he only known the truth. It was Jesus who was bound for trial, but it was actually Pilate who was not free. And, saddest of all, he had been within inches of the Living Truth, so close he could have reached out and touched it, but his cynicism held him back.

God has given us the means of finding the truth. He has given us faith and reason, and they are both his gifts, they are both of value in our search for truth, our search for God. Far from denigrating the power of human reason, the Church has consistently defended it. It has seen no contradiction between reason and faith, but has recognized their ordered relationship. Reason’s search for truth is not wrong, it is simply not fully sufficient in itself. It finds its fulfillment in the act of faith.

The more we know ourselves through both reason and faith, the more we come to know the truth of our relationship to God. And the more we know of that relationship, the more we know about how we ought to live. We begin to learn the truth about what is right and what is wrong in the things we do, and that knowledge of the truth, far from limiting our freedom, actually expands it. It sets us free to do what is truly right, and in that we will find our true fulfillment.

True freedom is not, as we are sometimes prone to think, the possibility of choosing either good or evil. The possibility of choosing evil is actually a perversion of freedom. True freedom is the possibility of always being able to choose what is truly good, and that we can do only if we come to know the truth about what is right and what is wrong. Know the truth, and the truth will truly set you free.

There is no contradiction between a Church that offers the love of Christ and a Church that teaches the truth which Christ embodies. Christians who endeavor to follow Christ and to live in his love should be fully disposed to learn from the witness that this Church provides.¹³ Its statements are not contrary to freedom of conscience, they are, rather, a statement of the truths which enable our consciences to act with true freedom.

III. CONSCIENCE: “*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*” (Jn 8:32)

What is conscience? Is it a body of knowledge about what is right or wrong? Is it an attitude of mind, a habitual outlook on moral conduct? In fact, it is neither of those things. It is something simpler. It is an act of judgment about the morality of an action one is considering doing. “Conscience is one’s last and best judgment concerning what one should choose.”¹⁴

Conscience measures a contemplated act against the objective standard of the moral law,

which is one aspect of the truth that sets us free and to which the Church bears witness. Conscience applies this law of love in the particular circumstances of daily life. For this reason, conscience is the immediate norm of our moral action as it moves us to do one thing or avoid another by making a judgment of reason about the good or evil of a particular case.¹⁵

In rendering the judgment of conscience on the moral quality of a particular act, we make use of the unity of truth as we know it — in part through natural reason (that truth “written upon our hearts,” as Paul says in Romans 2: 15) and in part through revelation. Conscience *presupposes* these sources of knowledge. In other words, conscience does not determine what is right or wrong, but rather makes a judgment about whether a particular proposed action is in accord with what is right or wrong and is, therefore, a good or evil action.¹⁶ This is why those people are wrong who say that morality is purely individualistic, that conscience is a wholly independent, exclusively personal capacity to determine what constitutes good or evil.¹⁷ In fact, to reduce conscience to so narrow and ineffectual a vision is actually to demean its real significance.

It is only because you and I know the same truth — whose fullness is to be found in Christ — that we can base our moral act in an operation of conscience. If decisions of conscience were no more than privately decided “truths,” we could never share a common good. Instead, it is essential that we have the capacity to know the truth and so to deliberate what act is good.

Conscience is not only our *last* judgment before acting, it must also be our *best*. However, if conscience is a human judgment, then it is also capable of error and is not infallible. This is why the Church teaches that conscience must be properly formed. It must be enabled to discern what actually does or does not correspond to the “eternal, objective and universal divine law” which human intelligence is capable of discovering.¹⁸

Our freedom is a freedom *for* the truth and not a freedom *from* the truth. Otherwise there would be no possibility of sharing in a true good. This is why the Fathers of Vatican II affirmed that “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 that 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.”¹⁹

Clearly a person must follow conscience in order to be morally responsible. Yet no human being can realistically claim that his conscience is simply infallible, since decisions of conscience depend on conformity to the objective moral law and do not create the moral law. But if conscience can be erroneous, therein lies the potential for tragedy. In spite of all sincerity, a conscience in error neither fosters fulfillment nor serves the good. If conscience, therefore, is to serve its purpose, it must not only be sincere, it must also be correct. How sad, indeed, to be utterly sincere in what we do and to be, at the same time, utterly and sincerely wrong. Conscience needs formation.

IV. FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE: “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed*

by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom 12:2)

The importance of conscience cannot be underestimated. The judgment of conscience about the goodness or evil of a contemplated act is not only a judgment on the value of the act itself, but is also a judgment on the doer of the act. His choice of action is also his choice of his own moral state. His actions reveal what he is and even contribute to making him what he is. To choose to do good is to choose to be a moral person; to choose to do evil is to choose to be an immoral person. The judgment of conscience is crucial.

“A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself.”²⁰ It is obvious that to act against a conscientious judgment made with certitude would really be a way of doing violence to one’s own moral state. However, we must also recognize the fact that human judgment is capable of error. Even when the person making the judgment is certain that he is right, he may easily fail to grasp the question correctly or to have the full knowledge he needs or to be aware of all the facts. In such cases, the person making the judgment would be acting in good faith and would not be guilty of sin, but he would still be wrong and the evil of the act would still take place.

One may be morally blameworthy for his lack of proper judgment and his own ignorance. “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.”²¹ The sources for errors in moral conduct may be varied. “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.”²²

In either case — whether the ignorance is or is not blameworthy — one always has the obligation to take whatever steps are required to ensure that one removes that ignorance, since it is an obstacle to right judgment and therefore to right living. Such ignorance is always harmful.

Earlier we spoke of conscience as one’s last and best judgment concerning what one should choose. For that judgment to be the *best* judgment, one must take care to see to it that conscience (the judgment) is properly formed. Good judgment never just “happens.” It always demands insight and knowledge of both facts and values.

There are certain norms for formation of conscience that will apply in every case, as outlined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: (1) One may never do evil even if the intention is that good will come of it; (2) one should do unto others as he would have them do unto himself; (3) charity always demands respect for one’s neighbor and his conscience.²³

In order for conscience to be properly formed, one must make the effort to be upright and truthful. This means making every effort to form judgments of conscience based on good reasoning and on the acceptance of the true good willed by God. As human beings we are

influenced by negative forces and by the temptation to sin. We are easily drawn to a false autonomy and the temptation to reject even legitimate authoritative teaching.

“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 fears, 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.”²⁴

The judgment of conscience is at the heart of our relationship to God and to neighbor. It is essential to our life and happiness, since it is conscience that directs us to live in such a way as to be everything that the loving Creator intended us to be. To be otherwise is to doom ourselves to a vain quest for a happiness that cannot be attained because it does not exist. We are daily faced with choices, large and small, all of which lead us in one direction or the other. We do not always have ready answers to the situations that arise, but we are bound to have minds and hearts open to the truth that will be presented to us through reason and through faith. We are bound to listen to the voice of God as both reason and faith make it known to us.

To have a well formed conscience is not to have our freedom constrained. It is, rather, to have a freedom that is full and complete, because in every choice made on the ground of a well formed conscience we come one step nearer to God and one step nearer to what, in our heart of hearts, we truly wish to be.

CONCLUSION: “*Christ lives in me.*” (Gal 2:15)

The grace of baptism is the grace of new life in Christ. That new life, however, is not a static gift given for the day of baptism and remaining within us as a “relic” of the sacrament. It is, rather, a new *life*, a new vitality renewed each day and drawing us ever nearer to the fullness of life that will be ours in Heaven. To live in Christ is to live as another Christ. It is to live for the truth and to lay down our lives for that truth as witnesses to the gift we have received. To live in Christ is to love self and neighbor as does Christ.

This love is not a feeling. It is a steadfast willing. It is a constant choice of the good, and that good must be illuminated by the truth known to reason and fulfilled in faith. This is the function of the well formed conscience. It is a responsibility of the highest order. It is something we must all pursue, for without a conscience informed by the truth we can never find fulfillment in the love of God or love of neighbor. Only when I have the certitude of a truly well formed conscience will I be able to say in truth, “Christ lives in me.”

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, 2nd edition with modifications from the Editio Typica, 1994, 1997, quoting from Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965, n. 3 § 2.

2 Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes [GS]*, n. 30. Pope John Paul II in the Encyclical *Veritatis splendor [VS]*, 1993, n. 32, writes: “But in this way the inescapable claims of truth

disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and ‘being at peace with oneself,’ so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment... there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others.”

3The ideas presented here are not original with me, but come from a delightful passage in *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis (Macmillan Co., 1966 [8th printing], Book I, chapter 1).

4“For us too *Moses*’ invitation rings out loud and clear, ‘See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil... I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live’ (Dt 30:15,19). This invitation is very appropriate for us who are called day by day to the duty of choosing between the ‘culture of life’ and the ‘culture of death.’” Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, 1995, n. 28.

5Cf. Jn 13.

6Jn 13:12.

7Jn 13:35.

8Jn 8: 31-32.

9Jn 14: 10.

10Jn 14: 26.

11Jn 14: 6.

12Jn 18: 37-38.

13*VS*, n.64, “It follows that the authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom ‘in’ the truth, but also because the Magisterium does not bring to the Christian conscience truths which are extraneous to it; rather it brings to light the truths which it ought already to possess, developing them from the starting point of the primordial act of faith. The Church puts herself always and only at the *service of conscience*, helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit (cf. *Eph* 4:14), and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.”

As the Second Vatican Council put it: “in matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful, for their part, are obliged to accept their bishops’ teaching with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind” (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, n. 25). And always, as Vatican II noted: “[I]n 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” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 14).

14Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus, Volume I, Christian Moral Principles*, Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, p. 76.

15Cf. *VS*, 34. Pope John Paul later writes: “The dignity of this rational forum and the authority of its voice and judgments derive from the *truth* about moral good and evil, which it is called to listen to and to express. This truth is

indicated by the ‘divine law,’ *the universal and objective norm of morality*. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good, whose attractiveness the human person perceives and whose commandments he accepts. ‘Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-à-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behavior.’” (*VS*, 60, quoting Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Dominum et vivificantem*, 1968, n. 43.)

16Cf. *CCC*, n. 1778.

17Cf. *Dominum et vivificantem*, n. 43.

18Cf. *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3; *VS*, n. 60.

19*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16, emphasis added. See also *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3: “On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience.”

20*CCC*, n. 1790.

21*CCC*, n. 1791, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16.

22*CCC*, n. 1792.

23Cf. *CCC*, n. 1789.

24*CCC*, n. 1784.