



Faithful Citizenship 2008

Second in a Series

Forming Consciences, Part I

“For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”

Gaudium et spes (The Church in the Modern World) 16

Forming Our Conscience

The word conscience comes originally from the Latin words *con-scientia*, meaning “with knowledge.” Simply put, it is personal knowledge, awareness, or judgment of the moral or ethical quality of a specific act. It is the meeting point between a concrete situation and moral principles.

Too often our society views conscience as merely that which stops individuals from doing wrong. However, conscience, in its fullest sense, calls us to something better, to be something more than what we are.

Conscience does not seek the lowest common denominator. It is not a means of calculating, “What is the minimum I must do – or avoid doing – to be a moral person?” Rather, it leads us to the higher, greater good, so that we can be as virtuous as possible.

When we form and follow our individual conscience, each of us is choosing not only what to do, but also what to become.

As Christians, we believe that a well-formed conscience is the voice of God inscribed within us at our creation.

The bishops at Vatican II taught in *Gaudium et spes (GS)* that, “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.... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary.

There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.” (GS 16)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* makes clear that conscience can never be coerced. “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)

It can happen, however, that we don’t sufficiently or correctly form our conscience. A person, for example, might sincerely believe that some human beings have less worth than others and that it is therefore acceptable to deny them their full human rights.

As the *Catechism* explains, this error in judgment can occur for different reasons. One person may never have heard of Christ and his Gospel. Another is misled by the bad example of others. A third is enslaved by his passions or addictions. A fourth places personal autonomy above every other good. A fifth automatically rejects the teachings of the Church. A sixth lacks charity. (CCC 1792)

It is precisely because our conscience is fallible that we need to form it and measure it against an objective truth. For Catholics that truth is Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light.”

There are three steps we can take to form our conscience as followers of Christ.

First, by coming to know and understand the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church; second, by becoming informed about the facts of any given issue; and third, by praying for divine guidance. (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (FCFC) 18)

Avoiding Evil and Doing Good

The U.S. bishops explain that, "There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons.... They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned." (FCFC 22)

Actions that attack or undermine human life and dignity are "intrinsically evil": intrinsic because these acts are wrong in their very nature, no matter what the intention or circumstance.

The Ten Commandments contain the most universally recognized list of intrinsically evil acts: murder, adultery, theft, perjury, and coveting. Abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, terrorism, and genocide also involve intrinsic evil. Other direct attacks on human dignity include torture, racism, and human trafficking. (FCFC 22-23)

Whenever a decision involves responding to an act or condition that is not intrinsically evil (e.g. poverty), we Catholics are free to apply our reasoned or prudential judgment. In such cases, we may arrive at different conclusions about the best course of action. In doing so, however, we must always be guided by the desire to do good and to help those in need.

As the U.S. bishops write, "Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues."

"Clearly not every Catholic can be actively involved on each of these concerns, but we need to support one another.... We are not factions, but one family of faith fulfilling the mission of Jesus Christ." (FCFC 29)

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith puts it this way, "A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good." (*Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* 4)

Resources

For additional information on Catholic social teaching and voter education resources contact the Wisconsin Catholic Conference or your diocesan office below:

Diocese of Green Bay Social Concerns Office: 920-272-8299

Diocese of La Crosse Justice and Peace Office: 608-791-2667

Diocese of Madison Office of Justice and Pastoral Outreach: 608-821-3086

Archdiocese of Milwaukee Office of Catholic Social Action: 414-758-2286

Diocese of Superior Office of Religious Education and Youth Ministry: 715-234-5044

Wisconsin Catholic Conference: www.wisconsinatholic.org, phone 608-257-0004

- [*Guidelines for Church Involvement in Electoral Politics*, WCC, 2006](#)
- Elections 2008 (various resources, including questions for candidates and results of candidate questionnaires)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: www.usccb.org

- [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#)
- [*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*](#)
- [*2007 Political Activity Guidelines for Catholic Organizations*](#)

The Holy See: www.vatican.va

- [*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* \(Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2004\)](#)