



SEMINARIANS FOR LIFE INTERNATIONAL™

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Dear seminarians and priests,

The Church teaches human beings can and should determine what is good or evil and guide their actions by this inner moral compass. Catholic doctrine on the conscience revolutionized the world. The ancient world believed a ruler was almost above morality while slaves had no will of their own. The Church boldly proclaimed everyone without exception must obey the moral law that is discernable to both pagans and Christians alike. Multitudes of martyrs followed the higher law of their conscience rather than obey unjust laws. Inspired by this witness, the Roman Empire and then progressively larger parts of the world converted to this worldview.

Modernity, and the 1960s glorification of “sex, drugs and rock n roll,” convulsed the West in a Tsunami of relativism. True understanding of the nature of conscience was a victim of this ideology. False notions that anything that feels good must be morally ok or that if something is legal then it is good, pervaded the world. The ridiculous idea that selfish pleasure seeking would lead to happiness wrecked lives and families everywhere.

Now in post-modernity liberal morality does not tolerate liberty or “free thinking” when people reject the dogmas of liberalism. Thus, doctors who conscientiously object to abortion, or sterilization, etc. are purged from the profession. Paradoxically, the new ideologues support conscientious objection and even civil disobedience if directed towards something liberals dislike such as animal experimentation.

Once again, the Church must renew our civilization, defending the splendor of truth and the real nature of conscience. Only a perverted conscience can view abortion as good and the defense of life as evil, but I have seen both recently. A sense of sin and a functioning conscience are needed for sinners to realize our deep need for a merciful savior. By defending conscience and forming the faithful in seeing the objectivity of right and wrong, we take the first step in the redemption of the world.

Yours in the Lord of Life!

Joseph Meaney PhD

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Dr. Joseph Meaney

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CONSCIENCE AND ITS FORMATION

The judgment of conscience is both a marvelous thing to behold and an incredibly serious matter. Our Lord inspired millions of martyrs whose consciences were formed in the Catholic Faith to tell their persecutors: *You can kill me, but you cannot make me violate my conscientious beliefs.*

WHAT “CONSCIENCE” MEANS

Conscience, or moral conscience, is a philosophical and theological term that comes from the Latin *conscientia*, “with knowledge”. The Latin in turn came from the Greek *syneidesis*. These earlier forms of the word have a double meaning of having knowledge and awareness that is still present today in Latin languages, but in English, it is broken up into two words: “conscience” and “consciousness.”

Sadly, the sublime reality of the conscience is frequently caricatured and even used as the justification for almost any personal belief today. Saying that my conscience compels or forbids me to do something can be a clever way to end all discussion or moral judgment. In the real world, however, this strategy fails. Try telling a

judge or police officer “my conscience allowed me to take that person’s car” and see how the law deals with such nonsense.

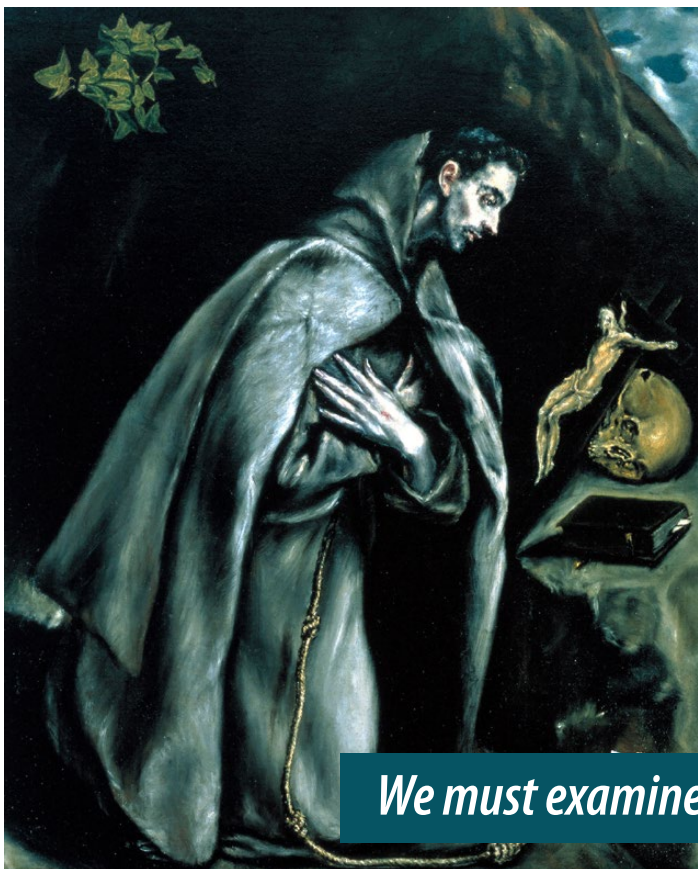
True conscience has a rational and objective foundation and its conclusions can be justified to others. In order for us to let conscience be our guide, we must know exactly what it is and what it is not.

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes 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: (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1778)

The Church places an extremely high value on conscience since she insists that one has a moral obligation to follow the judgments of our consciences.

We are explicitly warned, however, that conscience is not infallible. In fact, errors are so frequent that throughout her existence the Church has insisted forcefully that the *formation of conscience*, our moral education, is of paramount importance.

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. 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. In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the



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light for our path, 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. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 1783-1785)

We should have a deep appreciation for the fragility of conscience. It is the height of arrogance to assert that one knows what is right and wrong in all cases. Self-interest and sin can easily cloud or obscure our consciences, so everyone should humbly and respectfully seek guidance in moral matters from the Magisterium of the Church and authorities we trust as holy and wise persons.

OUR SALVATION IS INTIMATELY RELATED TO CONSCIENCE

What is at stake is nothing less than our eternal destiny. If our confused conscience leads us to “go with the flow” and accept something as right and good simply because it is popular or “politically correct” we can fall into grave errors for which there is no good excuse before God. This

principle is illustrated clearly in the second chapter of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans:

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (vs. 14-15)

The obligation to follow one’s conscience *is strictly linked to the moral requirement to instruct one’s conscience well.* Weak excuses-- *Everyone is doing it!* or *If it feels good, do it!*—can never become the mottos of well-formed and spiritually healthy persons. It is also true there are indeed many grey area situations where it is genuinely unclear where right and wrong lie. That is why the Church has expended so much time and effort in moral theology and bioethics over the centuries in order to assist those who face true moral dilemmas.

Conscience is not about knowing moral evil only in the abstract, but recognizing it concretely in a given situ-

ation. The result of a good moral decision can be positive, leading to a “clear conscience”, or negative, leading to a “guilty conscience”. It works like an inner voice, speaking with clarity and authority. *Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, put it poetically. “Conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths” (paragraph 16).

One can try to push conscience to the side, attempt to drown it out, belittle the significance of what one is about to do, excuse oneself from any responsibility (*I was ordered to do it, The penalty for doing the right thing was too severe*, etc.) but conscience remains as a personal moral compass. As many of us know too well, one can even make himself deaf to his conscience, so that he eventually stops hearing it; though even then, in certain moments of crisis, he can have an awakening and hear again the voice of conscience.

CONSCIENCE: FEELING OR ACTION?

One of the most valuable aspects of conscience is that it can nag and gnaw on us until we repent our sins and come back to the Truth. People may joke sarcastically about “Catholic Guilt” but this feeling of sinfulness is incredibly beneficial in driving us back to the merciful arms of God through the Sacrament of Reconciliation and amendment of life. It is similar to when pain alerts us to a physical problem and drives us to get the medical help we need.

St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* (vol. I, Q. 79, A. 13) refers to the judgment of conscience as an act. “For conscience, according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of knowledge to something; for conscience may be resolved into *cum alio scientia*, i.e. knowledge applied to an individual case.” Though it is a faculty strongly related to the mind, it relates not just to my intelligence, but also to my heart and will, appealing to the best in me. It calls me from above, but fully respects my freedom in doing so. Temptation, on the other hand, appeals to my baser instincts and weaknesses, trying to induce me to do something that violates what I know is right. Conscience helps me act freely and avoid subjugation to ideological demands while temptation enslaves me to desires, idols, or fashions.

All of us recognize the horror of persons without a conscience and the kind of acts they commit. Sociopathic

or psychopathic behavior is particularly terrible because cold, cruel cunning has replaced conscience. People with distorted or malformed consciences can be almost as hideous.

From these darkest corners of humanity, however, we can gain a greater appreciation for the sacredness and beauty of an upright conscience. We should strive to achieve this kind of conscience and reject with contempt the many counterfeit consciences proposed in our world today.

Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling” about what we should or should not do. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil. (USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, paragraph 17)

I hope that this short introduction to the important subject of conscience will inspire readers to form, educate and protect their own consciences and those of the people the Lord has charged them with serving.

Portions of this text are adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Joseph Meaney: *Conscience and Health Care: A Bioethical Analysis*.

Resources used in this article which we recommend for further study:

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, especially paragraphs 1776-1802

<http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>

Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, especially paragraphs 16, 19, 26, 50, 87

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, USCCB, especially paragraphs 17-34

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-title.cfm>