

Forming Our Conscience

*Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.*¹

Following our conscience

*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.*²

*The voice of conscience, being the immediate perception of the divine will, is to be followed always, even when it is defective... It is right when its dictates correspond to the objective moral order... It is erroneous when it fails to do so.*³

The Church has always taught that we are required to follow our conscience, indeed – as St Thomas Aquinas has argued – it could be sinful not to do so if our conscience reflects what we believe to be God's will and therefore morally right. In other words, if we are convinced of the rightness of our conscience, then to choose to go against it would be to choose to do wrong and therefore sinful. For this reason we should never be forced to act against our conscience (which raises the whole question of, for example, conscientious objection to war). Hence, Lobo says, *the importance of forming a right conscience in which (our) judgment coincides with the objective will of God.*

Forming our conscience

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...

*This cannot be said of the man who 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.*⁴

*Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path.*⁵

Forming our conscience is a very different matter to persuading ourselves that what we have decided “feels right” and therefore must *be* right – and especially if it is what we wanted to do all along. The crucial point is this: is our decision what *we* want to do or what *God* wants us to do? How do we decide whether the two are the same?

¹ Second Vatican Council – *The Church in the Modern World*, para 16

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1778

³ *Guide to Christian Living (A New Compendium of Moral Theology)*, George Lobo

⁴ Second Vatican Council – *The Church in the Modern World*, para 16

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 1783 & 1785

Let's say, for example, that you are an avid walker and are planning to hike across an unfamiliar section of the moors. It would be at best foolhardy, and at worst potentially fatal, to simply set off in any old direction and walk wherever the whim took you. There could be all sorts of unknown hazards along the route you have chosen, and how do you know where you are going or where you will end up? It would be safer and far more sensible to plan your route meticulously, ensuring you have a current and accurate map – possibly even a reputable guidebook – and to have told someone where you are going and when you expect to be there. The question is: is your choice to set off unprepared even though it would be totally irresponsible, or are you willing to take whatever time and research might be necessary in order to ensure a safe and enjoyable walk?

If someone steals something from a shop or, perhaps, from their place of work, they may justify their action by claiming that the loss to the shop or to their employer is negligible. What they have failed to do is to take into consideration the moral issue that they taking something that doesn't belong to them – in other words they are stealing. Justifying their action is very different to informing their conscience, which would involve taking into account the moral wrong and the sinfulness of their action and deciding (in conscience therefore) not to do it.

If we *really* want to know what is morally right, then we have to consider every possible source of guidance and information including scripture (God's law), Church teaching, and, if necessary, the advice of our priest or a spiritual director. If, on the other hand, we are reluctant to find out what the Church teaches and what is according to the will of God, then maybe that's a sign to us that we are more interested in the convenient and less challenging decision that we would prefer. Forming our conscience isn't simply about looking at options and then choosing the one that looks best or feels right to us – like looking in the fridge at all the healthy options and choosing half a cream sponge! We are standing before God and our decision-making process must therefore be honest and open – honest before him and open to his guidance and grace, otherwise he knows (and so do we) that we haven't therefore fully or rightly informed our conscience.

Return to your conscience, question it... Turn inward, brethren, and in everything you do, see God as your witness. (St Augustine)

Making up our own mind

*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.*⁶

Recently someone was bemoaning the demise of most of our midweek holydays of obligation, now moved to the nearest Sundays. Basically this was done to protect the significance and sanctity of those days given that increasing numbers of people were simply ignoring them and therefore also ignoring the Church's teaching on the obligation to celebrate Mass on holydays. But then people are doing the same with

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 1783 & 1785

Sundays as well, putting the celebration of Mass in second place to other activities that they decide on the day are more important. It doesn't seem to matter that a deliberate decision not to go to Mass on Sundays and holydays is a mortal sin – people are deciding for themselves what is sinful (even mortally sinful) and what isn't, what Church teachings they will observe and which they won't, even which of God's commandments they will keep and which they won't. We can't do this – we can't ignore God's law or Church precepts just because they may be inconvenient to our lifestyle, and we certainly can't decide for ourselves what is sinful and what isn't. Again we have to form (inform) our conscience on these matters and not just do what we decide we can justify, and God's law and Church teaching are central to that process.

Sadly this seems to be a reflection of what is going on in the society around us. People won't be told what to do and what not to do anymore. It shows itself in a general lack of respect for those in positions of authority and for the law (or, at least, those aspects of the law that people find inconvenient) and those who have to enforce it. People are now doing the same with God, his Church and Church teaching.

In chapter eight of the first book of Samuel, the people ask Samuel for a king to rule over them 'like the other nations'. What they failed to remember was that they could never be like the other nations because God was their king, but they rejected his kingship for that of an earthly ruler. Repeating what we said right at the beginning:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey... 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.

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