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Conscience: Being True to Ourselves

Topics

- The Nature of Conscience
- Descriptions of Conscience
- Our Inclination to the Good
- Conscience in Catholic Tradition

Key Terms

conscience

erroneous conscience

hero

informed conscience

lax conscience

sin

"The Splendor of Truth"

Objectives

To help the students:

- understand that our dignity as persons created by God requires us to follow our conscience.
- recognize that popular uses of the word *conscience* are frequently inadequate to describe all that the term involves.
- realize that a fuller understanding of conscience includes three dimensions: awareness, development, and judgment.
- know that Scripture and Tradition emphasize the importance of using our conscience to make informed moral decisions.

Catechism Connection:

Catechism of the Catholic Church #s 45, 96, 869, 1747, 1796, 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1871

Lesson Plan Strategies

Day 1

THE NATURE OF CONSCIENCE

1. Pray the chapter opening prayer (p. 61).
2. Direct the students to draw a symbolic representation of conscience as stated in the “Before we begin . . .” exercise (p. 61). This activity gives students an opportunity to reflect on their impressions about conscience before entering into discussion about it. Remind the students that they need not concern themselves with the quality of their drawings, even though some students will want extra time to perfect their drawing. After the students have drawn their images of conscience, you might allow them to walk around the room to see how other students picture the term. Then discuss these questions with the students:
 - What images are used most frequently to depict conscience? Why these images?
 - Were there any unusual images used or images that didn't make immediate sense?
 - What were you trying to convey by the image you used?
 - Based on the variety of images used, what is the basic understanding of what conscience means for the members of the class?
3. Instruct the students to read “The Nature of Conscience,” “The Heroism of Being True to Conscience,” and “The Voice of God Echoing in Our Hearts.” Then write the following statement on the board: *An essential characteristic of heroism is being true to one's conscience.* Poll students on whether they agree or disagree with the statement. Discuss ramifications of the statement.
4. Direct students to complete the Activity (p. 62). Place them in small groups to explain and challenge each other's ranking. Invite comments from members of each group about what heroism means based on their discussions. Discuss together the question: *Do all of these examples of heroism involve a decision of conscience?*



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The Life Journey of a Hero

Handout 4:1—The Heroic Journey gives a classic description of the journey of a hero or heroine. Either distribute the handout or reproduce it on an overhead projector. Use the assignment on the handout to provide students an opportunity to think about examples of people who act heroically today. The assignment can be done individually or in small groups.



Whom Would You Invite?

A way to get the students to think about some of the great people of history is to ask them to imagine that they have an opportunity to invite any five to ten people, living or dead, real or fictional, to a party. After they have compiled their lists, direct students to comment on the following questions:

- *What character traits do these people possess that lead you to place them on your guest list?*
- *Are any of these people “heroes,” or are they merely “celebrities”?*
- *Are all of your choices “people of conscience”?*
- *Can you learn anything about following your conscience from any of these people? What would that message be?*



Are Conscientious Objectors Heroic?

Tell students: *The Selective Service laws of the United States include a provision that young people who in conscience believe that participation in military service is wrong need not serve in the military. Such people are known as “conscientious objectors.” In time of a draft, they would spend two years in nonmilitary service instead of military service. Presumably, those serving in the military are also doing so in good conscience.*

Pose the question: *Is filing as a conscientious objector a form of heroism?*



Case Study Link

Case Study 4-A offers students an opportunity to examine a specific situation in which people disagree in good conscience.



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Day 2

DESCRIPTIONS OF CONSCIENCE

1. Begin with the following prayer:

Let us pray...

Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;
 keep watch over the door of my lips.
 Do not turn my heart to any evil,
 to busy myself with wicked deeds
 in company with those who work iniquity;
 do not let me eat of their delicacies.

(Psalm 141:3-4)

May we listen for the voice of God in our lives
 And follow God always and in all ways. Amen

2. Point out to the students that the central question of this chapter is, *Should people always follow their conscience?* The first step to answering that question is clearly defining the term. Have the students read “Defining Conscience.” Point out that the word conscience is used in a variety of related ways in popular usage. Use the following questions to initiate discussion:
- *Is Jen following her conscience? Why or why not? Is the understanding of conscience illustrated in the story (an inner voice) adequate, or should more be included in a definition of conscience? What problem could result if we define conscience in this way?*
 - *What is the understanding of conscience illustrated in the story about Mick? What problems could result if we define conscience the way it is described here (upbringing)?*
 - *Is Darrell’s response the result of conscience? Why is this a too-narrow understanding of conscience (a feeling)?*
3. Have the students read “Descriptions of Conscience,” “An Inner Voice,” “Our Upbringing,” “A Feeling,” and “Root Meaning of Conscience.”
4. Ask the students to work individually as they write down examples for the Group Talk exercise (p. 63). Wait a few minutes, and then ask them to share their responses and discuss them in small groups. After about ten minutes, invite the students to report on the examples generated by their group.
5. Go over “For review...” questions (p. 66) with the students: **1. Who were Franz Jägerstätter and Cesar Chavez? Franz Jägerstätter was an Austrian Catholic who was arrested and hung when he refused to be drafted into the Nazi army during World War II. Cesar Chavez was a California migrant farm worker who during the 1960s and 1970s led a long but successful campaign to organize migrant workers into a union. 2. Name three ways that conscience is understood in popular usage. Why is each usage insufficient to express all that conscience involves? In popular usage conscience is often viewed as an inner voice, our upbringing, or a feeling. Conscience involves more than what each of these usages implies. 3. What does the Latin root of the word conscience mean? What does this root meaning tell us about conscience? The root meaning of conscience is “with knowledge.” Therefore, conscience refers to an action based on knowledge, or judgment.**



Upbringing and Feelings in Conscience Formation

The two Reflection activities (pp. 64 and 65) offer additional exercises to help students appreciate the importance of upbringing and feelings in conscience. Again, it is important to point out to students that both of these shape and influence the process of conscientious decision making, but they are not all there is to conscience.



Conscience or Not Conscience?

Handout 4:2—Conscience or Not Conscience? gives students an opportunity to analyze specific case studies to determine whether conscience is at work. Divide cases up among small groups. Alert students that they are to examine their case in terms of the inadequate understandings of conscience described in the text and then the three-dimensional definition of conscience provided in the text. Use the cases to explore the meaning of conscience in concrete situations.

Day 3

OUR INCLINATION TO THE GOOD

1. Begin with the following prayer, a paraphrase of 1 John 3:18: *Jesus, you gave your life out of love for us. May we also love not only in word or speech, but also in truth and action. Amen.*
2. Have the students form small groups. Assign each group one of the Group Talk points (p. 66). Have each group appoint a representative to report to the class on how they completed the assignment. After ten minutes, call on these representatives to report to the class. Discuss the questions:
 - *Has either our personal or our society's awareness of right and wrong changed over time? If so, how?*
 - *Can personal or social conscience be deepened or raised? If so, give examples.*
 - *Can someone lack conscience? (An example of "consciousness raising" is slavery, once perceived as acceptable by many people; now universally condemned by the world community.)*
3. Direct the students to read "The Three Dimensions of Conscience" and "Jerry's Problem." Elicit response to the accompanying Activity (p. 67).
4. Place on the board again the three dimensions of conscience: *awareness/orientation*, *development*, and *judgment*. Then have the students read "Not to Decide Is to Decide," "Development: Enhancing Our Capacity to Know and to Choose the Good," and "Judgment: Making Choices Based on Our Awareness of the Good." Review with students the distinctions made among the following terms: *lax conscience*, *informed conscience*, *erroneous conscience*, and *sin*.
5. Have the students complete the Reflection activity (p. 71).

Day 3 (continued)

6. Go over the “For review...” questions (p. 71): **1. An accurate definition of conscience includes three interrelated dimensions. What are they?** *Conscience includes a basic awareness that there is right and wrong, development of that awareness, and finally making judgments based on that awareness.* **2. What is a lax conscience?** *A lax conscience is a lazy conscience. A person with a lax conscience does nothing to develop a sense of right or wrong or to act accordingly.* **3. What does developing an informed conscience involve?** *People can take many steps to develop their conscience into one that is more informed. Examples of such steps would be consulting Church documents, consulting friends or knowledgeable persons, praying over decisions, and talking to people who have faced similar decisions.* **4. Define erroneous conscience.** *A person who honestly does what he or she believes to be the right thing but who nonetheless chooses wrongly is acting with an erroneous conscience.* **5. What term is used in Church teaching for not following conscience?** *Sin is the term used for knowingly going against one’s conscience and doing what is wrong.*

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

**Lack of Conscience and Deliberately Uninformed Conscience**

The Activity (p. 68) provides the students an opportunity to examine the question: *Is it possible for someone to lack conscience?* (We can answer yes to the question and still maintain that following conscience is an inherently human capacity.) The Group Talk exercise (p. 69) offers the students an opportunity to examine more closely the need to form and develop awareness of right and wrong in conscience formation.

**Conscience—The Hard Questions**

The definition of conscience provided in this section of the text invariably raises questions in thoughtful students. **Handout 4:3—The Question of Conscience** lists a number of issues that often arise in any discussion about conscience. It may be helpful to distribute the handout or reproduce it on an overhead projector and allow the students to answer the questions individually or in small groups before addressing them as a class.

**Case Study Link**

Case Study 4-B aims to remind the students of the value of ongoing conscience formation, the second dimension of conscience presented in the text. After students have completed the questions accompanying the case, invite responses to the question: *What are some ways that you feel your conscience is being shaped and informed as you go through life?*

Day 4

CONSCIENCE IN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

1. Pray the opening prayer (p. 61) to begin the session.
2. Direct the students to read “Conscience in Scripture: Knowing of the Heart.” Ask them: *What does the association of conscience with heart in Scripture add to our understanding of the concept?*
Allow students a few minutes to complete the Activity (p. 73). Have half the class write a prayer of conscience. Collect the prayers and choose from among them to include in the prayer service in the next session.
3. Have the students read “Second Vatican Council on Conscience” and “Conscience in Church Teaching: Does the Church Say ‘Follow Your Conscience?’” Point out to the students that this council brought conscience into the forefront of modern Catholic thought. Ask whether anyone has comments or questions regarding the three questions and answers in the section. Select students to read the quotes found in the quote box. Use the Reflection activity (p. 74) to review the main points of Catholic teaching about conscience.
4. Instruct students to read “Pope John Paul II on Conscience.” Ask them: *What concerns does the pope raise about the way conscience is sometimes understood by people today? What points does he offer to give us a more accurate understanding of conscience?*
5. Read slowly the statements in “When we follow our conscience we. . . .” Allow students a few minutes to write their thoughts on the Reflection activity (p. 76).
6. Go over the “For review. . .” questions (p. 76).
 1. **What biblical term is the closest equivalent of the concept of conscience?** *In the Old Testament, the term heart most closely resembles the concept conscience.*
 2. **What attacks on human dignity was the world facing that influenced Church leaders to convene Vatican Council II?** *Vatican Council II was partially a response to the blind obedience associated with Nazism, fascism, and communism, which was an affront to human freedom and dignity.*
 3. **Name two documents of Vatican Council II that address the question of conscience.** *Two Vatican II documents that speak directly about conscience are the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World and the Declaration on Religious Liberty.*
 4. **In “The Splendor of Truth,” what are the three points about conscience that Pope John Paul II offers?** *Pope John Paul II offers the following three points regarding conscience:*
 1. *For Christians, conscience can never be divorced from the inspiration of Jesus.*
 2. *There is a community dimension to conscience.*
 3. *For Catholics, Church teaching holds a privileged place as the source of moral guidance.*



HOMEWORK

- Have the students study for the Chapter 4 Test.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES



Movies about Conscience

Direct the students to the “Model of Morality” for this chapter. Robert Bolt’s play and film titled *A Man for All Seasons* portrays Thomas More’s struggle to remain true to his conscience. You might show the video or portions of it and invite students to write about the film in relation to the following three topics: heroism, conscience, and moral maturity.

A number of other videos are available that depict struggling with conscience, such as:

- *Before and After* (A father and mother struggle with whether to tell the truth about their son’s killing of his girlfriend.)
- *Schindler’s List* (Businessman Oscar Schindler plays a dangerous game trying to prevent his Jewish workers from being deported to concentration camps during World War II.)
- *Gandhi* (The famous Indian pacifist struggles to achieve independence for his nation using techniques that reflect his rejection of violence and adherence to universal principles of truth.)



The Catechism on Conscience

Handout 4:4—The Catechism Speaks about Conscience contains passages from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on this important topic. By rewriting these passages, students can gain a clearer understanding of official Church teaching on conscience.



Case Study Link

Case Study 4-C speaks about whistle blowing, which often is an act of both conscience and courage for those involved. Use the case to discuss the cost involved in being true to one’s conscience.

Day 5

TESTING AND PRAYER SERVICE

1. Pray one or more of the prayers composed by the students during Day 4.
2. Administer the Chapter 4 Test.
3. After tests are collected, allow students a few minutes to write in their notebooks their thoughts on this question: *How can I apply the information presented in this chapter to my own life?* Invite them to share their thoughts on the question with the class.
4. Use “Celebrating Morality” as the basis for a prayer service centered on conscience.



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Chapter 4 Test

Name: _____ Date: _____

Matching (2 points each)

Choose the name in the right column that best matches the statement in the column on the left and place the letter in the corresponding blank.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. ___ Began United Farm Workers Union | A. Franz Jägerstätter |
| 2. ___ Catholic who died rather than participate in war | B. Cesar Chavez |
| 3. ___ Englishman beheaded for following his conscience | C. Emiliano Zapata |
| | D. Dietrich Bonhoeffer |
| | E. Thomas More |
| | F. King Henry VIII |

Matching (2 points each)

The text contrasts popular but inadequate understandings of conscience with a more complete understanding of conscience. For the following list, place an *A* next to the items that describe a dimension of an accurate understanding of conscience, and place a *B* next to the items that do NOT represent an accurate understanding of conscience.

- ___ act of judgment
- ___ obeying another
- ___ developing one's capacity to know what's right
- ___ doing what one wants to do
- ___ following without question what our parents tell us
- ___ Jiminy Cricket
- ___ seeking to make informed decisions
- ___ recognizing that there is right and wrong
- ___ feeling guilty
- ___ one's upbringing

True or False (2 points each)

Church Teaching on Conscience

In the following list of statements, mark an item as *true* if it reflects official Church teaching on conscience and *false* if it does not.

- Christians are called upon to act conscientiously. _____
- In life or death decisions, Christians should set aside conscience and obey civil law. _____
- Conscience cannot err, that is, a person's conscience cannot be mistaken. _____
- As a manifestation of their dignity, Christians should do what they want to do. _____
- Human beings have a law inscribed by God in their hearts. _____
- People should make personal, thoughtful, and informed judgments. _____



Handout 4:1—The Heroic Journey

The heroes and heroines of classic literature typically go through four stages in their heroic journey. As you read through these stages, think about how these stages could be interpreted symbolically.

1. First, the hero or heroine experiences a call to leave safe and familiar surroundings and to go to an unknown land in search of a new understanding of life and a different personal identity beyond that of his or her childhood.
2. Second, the hero or heroine discovers that the road leading out of his or her secure homeland is fraught with obstacles, dangers, threats, and struggles. The prize sought makes battling these obstacles, although difficult, worth the cost.
3. Third, sometime during the struggle the hero or heroine comes to an awareness of inner strength, making him or her capable of overcoming difficulties. The hero/heroine now has something to offer others and feels drawn to do so.
4. Fourth, the hero or heroine returns home but as a changed person. He or she brings a new vision to the people left behind. However, the journey and the struggle do not end here. Some people will welcome this new vision; others will reject it and challenge the one who brings it. Even in the face of ridicule and rejection the true hero or heroine remains steadfast to the goodness of the gift he or she has discovered and hopeful that people will share the new vision.

A. Identify someone from our modern times who fits this classic description of heroism in his or her life. (The person can be a public figure or someone you know personally. The person can be real or a character in a novel or film.) Explain your example.

B. How might you exhibit heroism in some specific way in your own life as outlined above?



Handout 4:2—Conscience or Not Conscience?

Your textbook suggests that many people have a faulty understanding of conscience. It also describes three dimensions of a more accurate definition of conscience. Read over the following examples of decision making. For each example, consider the details that are given and make a case for or against the decision as being an accurate description of following conscience. How might each example change to make it more clearly an expression of following conscience or not following conscience?

1. Michelle and Jana leave the party at the same time. Michelle knows that Jana has had quite a bit to drink and asks her, "Are you okay to drive home?" Jana says, "Don't worry. I'm fine." So Michelle gets into her own car and leaves Jana to drive home by herself. The next day Michelle discovers that Jana had an accident on the way home. Michelle feels terrible about not forcing Jana to go home with her.
2. Eric's supervisor informs him that as head of accounting at the company, Eric must terminate the employment of three people under him. Each of these employees is less than five years away from retirement, and Eric feels strongly that firing them is unnecessary and a cutthroat way for the company to save a relatively small amount of revenue. Besides, he has become personally friendly with all three workers as well as their families. Nonetheless, Eric reasons that if he doesn't fire them, someone else will. Besides, his own job would be in jeopardy if he doesn't follow company directives. He instructs his secretary to notify the three workers that their jobs have been terminated, effective immediately.
3. Sergeant Jeremy Winston's company has been assigned to participate in a military action in a small Caribbean country. Reading about the planned action and talking to some friends who have political connections, Sergeant Winston concludes that this use of military force is uncalled for and, in fact, immoral. However, he believes that as a member of the military he is required to follow orders without judging them. He joins with the rest of his company in carrying out the mission.
4. Miguel's father always told him never to back down from a fight. He had lived up to his father's expectations on a number of occasions. Tonight, however, while he was in a heated argument with another boy, two of the boy's friends surrounded him. Although he felt bad about doing so, Miguel decided to back down and leave the group before getting into a fight and getting seriously hurt.
5. Rick belonged to a group that had been terrorizing other young people in order to get money from them. All group members, including Rick, had pledged their loyalty to one another. Recently, they had also begun to shake down older people, even breaking into the homes of some older women and taking whatever they could. Rick was not comfortable with this turn of events. When he realized that some of their victims were actually friends of his own grandmother, Rick made an anonymous phone call to alert the police about the next planned break-in.