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## Introduction

(pp. 74–76)

### LESSON OBJECTIVE

- Conscience is sacred

### BASIC QUESTION

- Why does Christian tradition see conscience as sacred?

### KEY IDEA

- Christian tradition sees conscience as sacred because, through it, God speaks to us.

### ANTICIPATORY SET

Have the student read the entire story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan (2 Sm 11:1–12:25).

Ask the following question:

- The Book of Samuel says that God loved David, because he was a man after God's own heart (1 Sm 13:14). What insight do we gain about David's heart from this episode in David's life?

### GUIDED EXERCISE

Have the class **brainstorm** examples of people being required by their government or law to do what is immoral either in the past or today.

- Not being allowed to rent a home to a minority member (in the past).
- A homeowner having to rent a home to an unmarried couple.
- A pharmacist being required to sell contraception.
- A doctor being required to refer a woman for an abortion.
- A teacher being required to teach her first graders that homosexuality is "normal."

## CHAPTER 4

# The Moral Conscience

In the following passage of Scripture, the prophet Nathan confronts King David. King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who was a soldier in the king's army. In order to conceal his sin and take Bathsheba as his wife, the king had arranged for Uriah to be sent to the front line of battle on a suicide mission, thus adding murder to his sin of adultery:

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children: it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man. Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of the sun. For, you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.'"

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sins; you shall not die." (2 Sm 12:1-13)



### FOR DISCUSSION

- What is a conscience?
- How does the conscience aid a person who seeks to live a truly Christlike life?
- How does a person develop his or her conscience so that he or she can be confident of right judgment?



King David in Prayer by Gribler.

"Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel smiling the people. 'Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly;... Let thy hand, I pray thee, be against me and my father's house.'" (2 Sm 24:17)

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ What were David's sins against Uriah?  
Adultery and murder.
- ❑ Which commandments did David break?  
The Fifth and the Sixth.
- ❑ How did David react when he understood what he had done?  
He admitted his sin.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ What is the literal meaning of the word conscience?  
It is a Latin-based word meaning "with knowledge."
- ❑ What meaning does 'popular wisdom' often give to the word conscience?  
Feeling okay or not feeling guilty about what you have done.
- ❑ What is the legal meaning of conscientious objection?  
A personal appeal that to carry out a particular action that has been ordered by legitimate authority would be against one's conscience. In the case of Quakers, it usually results in being excused from military service.
- ❑ Why is the civil and legal recognition of conscientious objection vital today?  
Because the civil law permits and sometimes even requires morally evil actions.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Conduct a **think/pair/share** on the following question:

- Without knowing any more about conscience than the popular understanding given above, how is it likely that the popular notion is erroneous?

*Conscience has to do with knowledge, not with feeling. People can feel okay about something that is wrong, as David at first felt "okay" about committing adultery with Uriah's wife and then trying cover up her pregnancy, even to the point of causing Uriah's death.*

## CLOSURE

**Free write** for five minutes, summarizing what you have learned about conscience in this lesson.

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- ☐ Study Question 1 (p. 96)
- ☐ Practical Exercise 1 (p. 98)
- ☐ Workbook Questions 1–2
- ☐ Read "What is a Conscience?" through "Sources of Conscience" and "Additional Arguments for the Existence of Conscience" (pp. 77–80, 94)

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Have the students write a **paragraph** about something that, if the law were to require them to do it, they would refuse based on their conscience. Explain both what the act would be and why they would refuse in conscience.



The Fathers of the Church called conscience "the spark of the Holy Spirit," "the sacredness of man," and "the sanctuary of God."

## INTRODUCTION

An essential theme in moral theology involves how to apply the moral law to concrete actions and situations. To evaluate the moral value or relative goodness of an action requires us to use our conscience correctly. The word *conscience* itself is derived from the Latin *cum scientia*, which means "with knowledge."

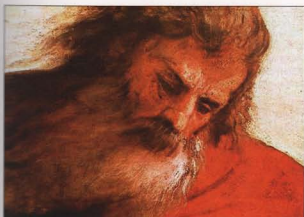
Like the terms "freedom" and "free will," the concept of conscience can often be misunderstood today. Popular wisdom often equates conscience with "feeling okay" about a decision or, more precisely, "not feeling guilty" about an action. People appeal to the role of their personal conscience in statements such as, "I ask that my conscience be respected," "Your conscience may say this is wrong, but my conscience sees things differently," or, "My conscience allows me to do this."

People are very assertive about their rights when it comes to actions done "in good conscience." There is a general sense that the conscience enjoys a certain autonomy that needs to be respected in each person. Legal recognition of conscientious objection to some aspects of civil law (e.g., a Quaker who refuses military service as a part of his or her religious belief) serves as a good example of the generalized respect paid to the role of conscience in making moral decisions.

Christian tradition gives conscience the highest respect. The fathers of the Church called conscience "the spark of the Holy Spirit," "the sacredness of man," and "the sanctuary of God." It is considered sacred, for through it God speaks to us. The fourth-century theologian Origen affirmed that conscience is at the heart of the spirit of man, what he termed "the soul of the soul is conscience," and he assured us that it can be seen as "a corrective spirit and teacher of man." (See Supplementary Readings)

The civil and legal recognition of conscientious objection is of vital necessity in modern times because the civil law sometimes permits or even requires morally evil actions. This might be the case with a pharmacy owner who refuses to sell the morning-after pill. A society is said to be just when its laws, within due limits, defend the freedom of conscience of each of its citizens.

Before we proceed in later chapters to specific moral issues, let us examine the role of the conscience in making moral decisions.



"When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking" (CCC 1777)

## WHAT IS A CONSCIENCE?

Properly understood, conscience is a practical judgment of reason made by the intellect regarding the good or evil of a particular act, in light of objective moral standards—the moral law. Conscience is not a feeling, nor an emotion, nor a hunch; nor is it the mere absence of guilt or regret. It is not a theoretical judgment on whether something is good or evil, but rather a practical judgment regarding a moral act.

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete fact that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. (CCC 1778)

Since conscience is a function of reason and intellect that evaluates the moral content of a given action, the person who acts according to conscience is responsible for his or her actions.

According to St. Paul, conscience in a certain sense confronts man with the law, and thus becomes a "witness" for man: a witness of his faithfulness or unfaithfulness with regard to the law, and of his essential moral rectitude or inquiry. Conscience is the only witness, since what takes place in the heart of a person is hidden from the eyes of everyone outside. Conscience makes its witness known only to the person himself. And, in turn, only the person himself knows what his own response is to the voice of conscience. (*Veritatis Splendor*, 57)

The gifts of the Holy Spirit received at Baptism help to enhance the effectiveness of conscience in making sound moral judgments, keeping in mind the natural law, the teachings of Christ, and the Magisterium. It is intimately involved in every effort of discernment, whether that discernment involves a moral decision, a vocation, or a self-examination of personal sins and virtues. "When he listens to his conscience," says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the prudent man can hear God speaking."<sup>1</sup>

The conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one's neighbor. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16)

## What is a Conscience? and Sources of Conscience

(pp. 77–80)

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ☐ Definition of conscience
- ☐ Conscience as witness
- ☐ How we know conscience exists

### BASIC QUESTIONS

- ☐ What is conscience?
- ☐ What does conscience witness?
- ☐ How do we know conscience exists?

### KEY IDEAS

- ☐ Conscience is a practical judgment of reason made by the intellect regarding the good or evil of a particular act, in light of objective moral standards.
- ☐ Conscience both testifies to the moral law, and it is the only witness to how the person responds. When we listen to a well-formed conscience we are listening to God.
- ☐ The reality of conscience is witnessed both in the Sacred Scriptures and through human experience.

### GUIDED EXERCISE

Conduct a **think/pair/share** on the following:

Of the following two questions, which one is a principle of the moral law and which one is a question of conscience?

*Ask yourself, which one is a "given" for conscience and which one can conscience decide?*

- ☐ Shall I shoot the driver of the car that cut me off in traffic?

[Question of conscience]

- ☐ Is it wrong to commit murder?

[Principle of the moral law]

### ANTICIPATORY SET

Incorporate the story of Cain and Abel (Gn 4: 1–16) into the class's **opening prayer**. Ask the students to write for five minutes on what moral lessons they can draw from this first murder. Then share some of the responses.



## FOCUS QUESTIONS

☐ What is conscience?

Conscience is a practical judgment of reason made by the intellect regarding the good or evil of a particular act, in light of objective moral standards.

☐ What is meant when we say that conscience is not a theoretical but a practical judgment? Apply this to the case of David and Uriah.

The conscience does not decide what good and evil are. Rather, a certain act is an example of good or evil. Thus, David's conscience failed to decide whether it was right or wrong to have relations with Bathsheba or murder Uriah. However, after Nathan helped David see what he had done, his conscience convinced him that he had committed acts of adultery and murder.

☐ What does *Veritatis Splendor* mean by saying the conscience is the only witness of what takes place in the human heart?

Since it takes place inside the person, only that person knows what the conscience says to him or her and how the conscience is answered. Extension: the only other witness to conscience is God, who reads our souls.

☐ What is the effect of Baptism on the conscience? In Baptism, the soul receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which enhance the effectiveness of conscience in making sound moral judgments.

☐ Why can a prudent man hear God speaking when he listens to his conscience? God's moral law is written in every heart. A prudent man hears what the moral law says to him. God is man's only witness to this act.

## THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

**WISDOM** (*Enjoying the Presence of God*)

The fruit of perfect charity. Wisdom strengthens our loving knowledge of God and all that leads to and comes from him. This gift of the Holy Spirit gives us knowledge of the Divine Life of the Blessed Trinity and allows us to enjoy the presence of God.

**UNDERSTANDING** (*Discerning Divine Truths*)

The gift of Understanding enhances our perception of the mysteries of the Faith, enabling us to penetrate more deeply into the divine truths revealed by God. This gift enables us to appreciate the fullness of the Catholic Faith.

**COUNSEL** (*Making Wise Decisions*)

Counsel helps us judge promptly, correctly, and according to the will of God. It enables us to wisely choose those actions that will be for the glory of God and for our own salvation. Flowing from the gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel perfects the virtue of prudence and helps us know what we should, or should not do, in those situations that require a moral decision.

**FORTITUDE** (*Having Strength of Character*)

Fortitude makes us steadfast in the Faith, constant in struggle, and faithful in perseverance. This gift of the Holy Spirit gives us the strength and courage to profess and defend the truths of the Catholic Faith, to endure long and trying difficulties, and to complete the tasks that God has planned for our lives.

**KNOWLEDGE** (*Using Created Things Wisely*)

Knowledge enables us to discover the supernatural truth contained in God's creation and the path that we should follow in our journey to Heaven. This gift of the Holy Spirit permits us to live a life of detachment, using created things as God intended. It helps us to understand created things and their relationship with God.

**PIETY** (*Knowing God as "Abba" Father*)

The gift of piety teaches us the meaning of divine filiation, the joyful supernatural awareness of being children of God, and brothers and sisters of all mankind. Piety leads us to a true love for God as our merciful Father and for all human beings as his children.

**FEAR OF THE LORD** (*Serving God Faithfully*)

Fear of the Lord deepens our sense of sovereign respect in the presence of an all-powerful and loving God. This gift leads us to know the evil of sin and, therefore, to detest it, and impresses upon our hearts a spirit of adoration and a profound and sincere humility.

**THE FRUITS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The Fruits of the Holy Spirit are those supernatural acts, performed with peace and joy, that flow from the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. Their designation as fruits signifies that they are performed with pleasure and easiness—all difficulties disappearing in light of the pleasure and satisfaction that result from the good accomplished. Scripture lists the Fruits of the Holy Spirit as charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity. While traditionally designated as twelve, the Fruits of the Holy Spirit may be extended to include all acts of a similar nature.



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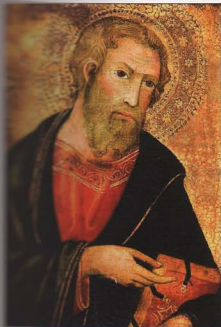
Chapter 4: The Moral Conscience

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ☐ With which organ of the human body does the Old Testament identify the conscience?  
The heart.
- ☐ How many times is the word conscience mentioned in the New Testament?  
Over thirty times.
- ☐ Why do we often ignore our conscience? Can you apply this to David's sin?  
We are blinded by passion, our will is weak or we are apathetic. At first, David was blinded by his lust for Bathsheba, then he was obsessed with covering up Bathsheba's pregnancy, and when that did not work, he arranged to get Uriah killed in battle so the problem would "go away."

## SOURCES OF THE CONSCIENCE

Conscience is a vitally important faculty for the Christian who is trying to lead a moral life in Christ. How can we consult our conscience, and how can we be sure that our conscience is telling us the truth? First, we should be aware of a few basic principles regarding conscience:



St. Basil the Great. In the New Testament, the term "conscience" is mentioned more than thirty times in reference to the need for good moral behavior.

**Conscience is addressed in Divine Revelation.** The Old Testament indicates that God interacts with our human consciences: "He searches out the abyss, and the hearts of men."<sup>2</sup> It teaches that the wicked person, "distressed by conscience...has always exaggerated the difficulties."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the Eastern tradition, the Old Testament stresses the intimacy of conscience to the point of identifying it with the heart. The Scripture counsels: "Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them about your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart."<sup>4</sup>

In the New Testament, the term "conscience" is mentioned more than thirty times in reference to the need for good moral behavior. St. Paul clearly states that the pagans are at fault for all their corruption, as "their conscience also bears witness."<sup>5</sup> He also encourages the Christians to carry out proper conduct, "not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience," for they will have to give an account to God for their conscience.<sup>6</sup>

**Conscience is known through our own human experiences.** The natural law is inscribed in the heart of every person. In the intimacy of our hearts, we can make free

choices, and conscience will assist us in those choices. This assistance is always available to us, even though the standards it sets cannot always be articulated immediately. Nevertheless, it serves as a companion for choices regarding concrete actions.

When a mother asks her son a question about his conduct at school, for example, the son is presented with an interior law that urges him to tell the truth. If he actually chooses to lie, his heart of conscience indicates to him the wrongness of the lie, even though he may proceed with successful statements.

Within our human intellect there exists a practical moral deliberation. We constantly ask ourselves, "Is this the right thing to do?" "Does this act reflect what is morally correct?" We may ignore or heavily suppress the ethical questions at the moment due to our blinding passions, weak will, or apathy, but the question is raised in the depths of our souls.

It is not an exaggeration to state that conscience is absolutely vital, both in indicating what is right and in reacting to what is wrong. There exist innumerable examples where a person suffers a lifetime of sorrow due to a grievously sinful action that went against conscience.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Our text says "There exist innumerable examples where a person suffers a lifetime of sorrow due to a grievously sinful action that went against conscience" (p. 79).

As an example of this, have the students go online to visit [www.afterabortion.org/mainyou.htm](http://www.afterabortion.org/mainyou.htm) and click the *Testimonies* link.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Have the students perform a **focused reading** on the selection from *Dignitatis Humanae* beginning "The importance of the interior dialogue..." using the following question:

- ❑ Wherein lies the entire mystery and dignity of the moral conscience?

*The interior dialogue man has with himself is also a dialogue with God. This is a mystery, because how it works goes beyond human understanding. This interior dialogue gives the moral conscience dignity because God thinks so much of conscience as to be present to it.*

## CLOSURE

Ask the students to write a **paragraph** explaining the difference between the moral law and conscience.

*The moral law is the principle of good and evil that should govern human behavior. The conscience is the judgment of the reason about whether a particular act was, is, or will be consistent with the moral law.*

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- ❑ Study Questions 2–6 (p. 96)
- ❑ Practical Exercises 2–4 (p. 98)
- ❑ Workbook Questions 3–7
- ❑ Read "Nature of the Conscience" through "Formation of Conscience" (pp. 80–81)

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Have the students **free write** for five minutes answering one of the three *Basic Questions* of this lesson.

# Nature and Formation of the Conscience

(pp. 80–81)

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ❑ The duties and rights of conscience
- ❑ The relationship between conscience and moral truth
- ❑ The duty to form one's conscience

## BASIC QUESTIONS

- ❑ What are the rights and duties of conscience?
- ❑ What is the relationship between conscience and moral truth?
- ❑ Why do we have a duty to form our conscience?

## KEY IDEAS

- ❑ We have both a duty and a right to exercise our moral conscience. Our duty is to obey the moral law and we have the right not to be forced to act against conscience or to be prevented from acting in accordance with it.
- ❑ A good conscience applies moral truth; it does not create it. Conscience fails when the objective moral law is ignored or misunderstood. Conscience is not an infallible guide and can be ignorant or blinded.
- ❑ We have a duty to form our consciences in order to know the moral law and to apply it to concrete situations.

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Turn to page 100b for a **mini-lecture** on why the conscience is subordinate to the objective moral truth.

## OUR MORAL LIFE IN CHRIST

Personal experience demonstrates that the power of conscience is very real. The advice columns are filled with people who are dealing with regrets over choices they have made without consulting or abiding by their consciences. The conscience is indeed a moral voice that does not keep silent, but rather appraises and reprimands, exhorts and corrects.

## NATURE OF THE CONSCIENCE

According to St. Paul, conscience in a certain sense confronts each of us with God's law, and thus becomes a "witness" for us—a witness of our own faithfulness or unfaithfulness to our moral beliefs. Only God has full access to that witness.

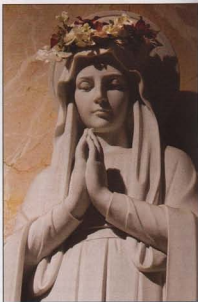
*The importance of this interior dialogue of man with himself can never be adequately appreciated. But it is also a dialogue of man with God, the author of the law, the primordial image and final end of man.... Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this, and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience: in being the place, this sacred place where God speaks to man.* (Pope John Paul II, General Audience, August 17, 1983)

**The exercise of moral conscience is more than an obligation; it is also a right.** It is through our consciences that we see and recognize the demands of the Divine Law. We are bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all our activities so that we may draw closer to God, who is our ultimate goal. Therefore, we must not be forced to act against conscience, nor may we be prevented from acting according to conscience, especially in religious matters.<sup>8</sup>

**A good conscience applies moral truth.** One of the biggest misconceptions regarding conscience is that it can create and apply its own moral standards. This belief is steeped in the error of subjective morality, the perspective that has given rise to everything from telling a "white lie" to "pro-choice" positions.

Remember that conscience, if it is to be reliable, must make its judgments consistent with objective moral truth, which is the moral law. If it does not, then that conscience is in error and is not to be trusted. In the spiritual world, as well as in the physical, the truth is objective, and it must be obeyed and applied accordingly. A "conscience" that acts against truth is no conscience at all. It is outside the power of individual conscience to be the source of its own moral truth.<sup>9</sup>

**Conscience fails when the natural law is ignored or misunderstood.** Failures of conscience in recognizing fundamental human rights have led to untold numbers of grave injustices in the course of human history. The human conscience must be habitually enlightened by moral truth according to the guiding light of the commandments and Christ's teachings on charity in order to function



The human conscience must be habitually enlightened by moral truth according to the guiding light of the Ten Commandments and Christ's teachings on charity in order to function properly.

## ANTICIPATORY SET

Conduct a **focused reading** on *Supplementary Reading 2*, from *Conscience and Freedom* (p. 89). Ask them to consider the importance of the words *delicate*, *interrogated*, and *awkward* in this passage.

- Conscience is a *delicate* guide because misusing it can distort, obscure, silence, or destroy it. Conscience must be listened to sensitively.
- Conscience must be *interrogated* or cross-examined, like a witness in court, to find out what it is really saying.
- Sometimes the answers conscience gives are *awkward* because conscience does not always say what one wants to hear and conversely may not be giving one the objectively right answer.



Therefore, if it is to be of any help to us at all in discerning right from wrong, our conscience must be properly formed according to the objective moral law.

**Conscience is not an infallible guide.** There is always the possibility of error in one's judgments. To act "in good conscience," one must first seek to know what is truly and morally good. The person who has become blind to the truth through habitual sin or who simply refuses to acknowledge moral truth will have significantly suppressed the effective function and purpose of conscience.

## FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE



How to Use the Guide by Bouguereau. "Our inviolable rule is that we never do anything that wounds our conscience or that makes us ashamed of ourselves."

Conscience knows not only what the moral law requires, but also how to apply it to concrete, real-life situations.

The better our consciences are formed, the more effective and trustworthy they will be in guiding us through moral choices. Because situations we encounter can be so varied and complex, formation of conscience is necessarily an ongoing duty.

The papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth) clearly explains why conscience is important to the truth:

It is immediately evident, the *crisis of truth* is not unconnected with this development. Since the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost, inevitably the notion of conscience also changes. Conscience is no longer considered in its primordial reality as an act of a person's intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now. Instead, 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 individualistic culture, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature. (*Veritatis Splendor*, 32)

Conscience is our most immediate authority in the deliberation of particular choices and actions. The classical Greek poet Homer states, "Our inviolable rule ought to be never to do anything that wounds our conscience or that makes us ashamed of ourselves."

Since it is through conscience that we judge our actions, such judgments should always be made with a correctly formed conscience. Therefore, we have the obligation to form our consciences in such a manner that its judgments habitually reflect the teachings of Jesus and his Church.

Although the natural law is inscribed on the human heart, we must be taught and directed in how to evaluate moral situations so as to live the moral life in Christ. This training begins with learning the basics such as the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes, but it cannot end there.

The most critical area of moral training is the *formation of conscience*. A conscience that is properly formed reflects Christ and his Church are, but also how to

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

### 1. How is conscience formed?

The human conscience must be habitually enlightened by moral truth according to the guiding light of the Commandments and Christ's teachings on charity in order to function properly.

### 2. What are the basics of knowing the moral law of Christ?

Knowing the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes are basic.

### 3. What are some of the obstacles to knowing moral truth that block acting in good conscience?

Two obstacles are the blindness to truth that comes from habitual sin and the refusal to see or acknowledge moral truth.

more Focus Questions on page 100b

## GUIDED EXERCISE

**Discuss** the following scenario with the students. The aim is not to solve the problem but to illustrate why applying the law to particular situations is not always obvious.

Your fourth grade son goes to a school that has a zero-tolerance policy toward weapons. Any student who brings a weapon to school will be expelled. One evening you learn your son had brought a Swiss army knife to school to show his friends. Upon questioning your son, you discover no adults at school saw the knife. You reprimand your child and explain to him the school rule and how serious it is.

- ☐ Do you, his parent, have a moral duty to inform the school authorities of what your son did, knowing full well that he will be expelled if you do?

## CLOSURE

Have the students write a **paragraph** explaining how conscience is ordered to the objective moral law both in its nature and in its development.

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- ☐ Study Questions 7–12 (p. 96)
- ☐ Practical Exercises 5–6 (p. 98)
- ☐ Workbook Questions 8–11
- ☐ Read "How to Develop a Well-Formed Conscience," *Supplementary Reading 4* (Parable of the Prodigal Son), and "Divisions of Conscience" (pp. 82–84, 89–90, 93)

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Have the students **free write** for five minutes on the idea that they disagree with the most in this lesson.



## How to Develop a Well-Formed Conscience (pp. 82–84)

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ❑ The importance of learning the moral teachings of the Catholic Church
- ❑ The importance of prayer in developing one's conscience
- ❑ The well-formed conscience and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

### BASIC QUESTIONS

- ❑ Why should we learn the moral teachings of the Catholic Church?
- ❑ Why is a serious life of prayer necessary to develop one's conscience properly?
- ❑ How does reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation foster a well-formed conscience?

### KEY IDEAS

- ❑ One way to develop a well-formed conscience is to learn the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, which offers us a body of moral teachings that merits our complete trust and confidence.
- ❑ Prayer will help us become familiar with God's will, which is also the aim of conscience. Prayer will also help know and understand the moral law and help us develop the moral courage to act correctly.
- ❑ A well-formed conscience can also be fostered through frequent reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

### HOW TO DEVELOP A WELL-FORMED CONSCIENCE

Since everyone has the duty to follow the dictates of his or her conscience, it follows that everyone is required to form the conscience according to the moral law taught by Jesus Christ and transmitted by the Church. An individual can enjoy the absolute assurance that if he or she sincerely tries to know and understand the teachings of the Catholic Church on moral matters, and attempts to apply that knowledge to his or her actual situations and circumstances, then he or she will be acting in good conscience.

There are several specific ways that have proven particularly effective in the formation of conscience:<sup>10</sup>

#### a. Learn the moral teachings of the Catholic Church.

In consulting our consciences, it may not be sufficient to simply have good will and a sincere desire to do what is right. For example, well-meaning people may feel under certain circumstances that divorce and remarriage without a declaration of nullity is morally acceptable, or that the direct killing of innocent people in a wartime situation would not violate the moral law. The presence of emotion, compassion, or strong loyalties can cloud the conscience and influence its discernment.

The faithful of the Catholic Church are blessed with a Magisterium that over the centuries has preserved and developed objective teachings on faith and morals that are faithful to Scripture and Sacred Tradition and can never change. We can study the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and be assured that these teachings represent the mind of Jesus Christ, who established the Church's teaching authority that has been handed down to us today.

#### b. Approach matters of faith and morals with an attitude of humility.

A proper disposition in favor of Church teaching is essential for developing and consulting the conscience. An attitude of faith and obedience is required to accept these teachings, even if they seem beyond human understanding or opposed to the conventional wisdom of today's culture. This obedience with respect to the teachings of the Church in many instances leads to a clearer and more profound understanding of the moral law.

The highest norm of human life is the divine law—eternal, objective and universal—whereby God orders, directs and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community by a plan conceived in wisdom and love. Man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that, under the gentle disposition of divine Providence, he can come to perceive ever more fully the truth that is unchanging. Wherefore every man has the duty, and therefore



St. Augustine by Foppa.  
The faithful of the Catholic Church are blessed with a Magisterium that over the centuries has preserved and developed objective teachings on faith and morals that are faithful to Scripture and Sacred Tradition and can never change.

### ANTICIPATORY SET

Have the students work with a **partner** to explain the logic behind the statement that opens this lesson's reading (p. 82):

Since everyone has the duty to follow the dictates of his or her conscience, it follows that everyone is required to form his or her conscience according to the moral law taught by Jesus Christ and transmitted by the Church.

Everyone has the duty to obey his or her conscience. Conscience is the judgment of practical reason based on one's best knowledge of the moral law. The best knowledge of the moral law is taught by Jesus Christ and transmitted by the Church. Therefore, each person should acquire this very best possible knowledge of the moral law.

the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means. (*Sollicitudo Huiusmodi*, §3)

The Church possesses the fullness of truth, and we would be extremely negligent if we ignore her teachings or refuse to be guided by her wisdom. Decisions made due to this negligence run a high risk of error and will often lead us into a sinful course of action.

**Prayer in sincere prayer and meditation.** Prayer is conversation with God. It is through prayer that God communicates to us. Fundamentally, the role of conscience is to discern God's will in a particular moral situation. Prayer, therefore, must accompany the development as well as the refinements of the well-formed conscience.

Knowledge of Church teachings alone would not give conscience the right information and wisdom for proper moral behavior, but the knowledge alone would not lead the person into a deeper sharing in Christ's life. It is through personal and frequent prayer that we can grow closer to God and develop a relationship with him—what we commonly call the “interior life.” Through our interior life, in concert with spiritual direction, we can be assured that our consciences will remain well-formed and in conformity with the teachings of Christ and the Church.

faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them. (CCC 1799)

Contemplation of the Word of God as found in Scripture, especially the Gospels, should be a vital component of Christian prayer. This prayerful meditation on Christ's words, which are “spirit and life,” and the frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist, are sure means to enhance knowledge and refine our lives and provide a sound basis for both moral judgments and moral behavior.

**Develop and maintain a well-formed conscience through frequent and honest self-examination.** The careful and prayerful interior evaluation of our thoughts, words, and deeds is called an *examination of conscience*. Examination of conscience is analogous to the review of game film by a sports team. The players and coaches review the film to identify mistakes and make the necessary changes and adjustments, thereby improving their game. Likewise, examination of conscience reviews our own lives with an eye toward avoiding sin and growing in virtue.

The entire Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew serves as a marvelous reference for self-examination. Jesus' teachings on mercy, judgment, humility, purity, and prayer, as well as the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the Church, ought to be a model for evaluating our own actions and attitudes. The Beatitudes, too, are helpful in looking at our spiritual practices of poverty,



St. Dominic in Prayer by El Greco. Prayer is conversation with God. It is through prayer that God communicates his will.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How can one have absolute confidence he or she is acting in good conscience?  
He or she can sincerely try to know and understand the teachings of the Catholic Church on moral matters and attempt to apply that knowledge to his or her actual situations and circumstances.
- Why is having a good will and a sincere desire to do what is right not enough to have a good conscience?  
A good conscience also requires knowledge of the moral law.
- Why should people learn the moral teachings of the Church?

The Church's moral teachings represent the fullest understanding of the moral law available to mankind.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Have students work with a **partner** to discuss the following question:

- ☐ We are expected to be “docile” to the teachings of the Church. Yet, many people criticize people of faith for not being taught how to think by their religion, but what to think. How is this view false?

The docile acceptance of moral teachings shows that we are open to receiving wisdom and knowledge that we could not get in any other way. If we expect to learn to lead a good moral life, we will have to be willing to accept teaching and coaching from those more skilled and experienced than ourselves.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Present the following scenario to the students to illustrate how humility is necessary to learn the objective moral law as taught by the Church.

Imagine that you are a good guitarist who has the opportunity to study with the greatest guitarist and guitar teacher who has ever lived. Now imagine you play a piece and your teacher tells you to finger a passage in a different way. You argue with him that your way is just as good as his.

Then **discuss** this question:

- ☐ How would this be like a Catholic who wants to sit in judgment on the moral law as taught by the Catholic Church?

## GUIDED EXERCISE

**Free write** on the following:

- ☐ Why are learning prayer, humility, and moral teachings important to become a moral person?

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Turn to page 100c for an activity to identify divisions of conscience.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Why is an attitude of humility necessary to form a conscience?

An attitude of humility is necessary toward Church teachings because they have been developed and preserved, faithful to the Scriptures and Tradition, over centuries. We also have to be humble because Church doctrine goes beyond human understanding and is sometimes opposed to popular opinion.

- Why is it important to engage in sincere prayer and meditation to have a good conscience?

Prayer is one of the most important ways that God communicates his will to us. Since the role of conscience is to discern God's will in a particular moral situation, it is important that prayer be a regular part of our lives.

humility, obedience, mercy, peacefulness, and faithfulness. Many prayer books include a rather solid and detailed examination of conscience, often following the structure of the Ten Commandments, that can help us in our self-examination.

An examination of conscience, however, must go beyond a dry analysis of our conduct. It must also lead to sincere repentance, which includes contrition for our sins and purpose of amendment (i.e., the intention to avoid sin in the future). Our examination—ideally performed daily, particularly at day's end before retiring for the night—must end with a firm resolution to avoid the sins and near occasions of sin that have confronted us. It does little good to acknowledge sins if we fail to commit to eliminating them from our lives. An act of contrition, whether formally recited or improvised from the heart, is a good way to conclude the day's examination.

**e. Participate frequently in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.** The ultimate goal of the examination of conscience is a conversion of heart leading to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which



Frequent Confession with due sorrow and repentance is a commendable practice that is invaluable for the formation of conscience.

results in a cleansing of the soul and a strengthening of the will. Frequent Confession with due sorrow and repentance is a commendable practice that is invaluable for the formation of conscience. The Parable of the Prodigal Son<sup>12</sup>—in which a wayward son repents of his sins and returns home to a loving, welcoming, and forgiving father—illustrates the same moving episode that occurs every time we return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

**f. If possible, seek spiritual direction.** Many people like to consult a spiritual director with whom they can discuss their interior lives and find help in matters of conscience. Prudence is required here to ensure finding a director who is himself or herself well-versed in the teachings of the Catholic Church and their applications to the moral life. Often a priest, although he may not always be able to offer extended spiritual direction in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, will be happy to meet privately for spiritual direction.

## PRINCIPLES OF CONSCIENCE

In this chapter, we have stated a few principles of conscience that may, on the surface, appear contradictory. We have said that to follow one's conscience is both a right and an obligation; we have also said that conscience is not infallible, and that in fact it can be poorly formed, in which case it is not to be trusted.

In order to better understand these seemingly conflicting principles, we can consider the following:

**An appeal to "conscience" does not automatically justify an act or viewpoint.** We first established that an invocation or appeal to conscience does not give free rein to any kind of action whatsoever. A "conscience" that views racism as justifiable or that dismisses the transcendent dignity of the person cannot be obeyed. If it were otherwise, every violation of human rights—from slavery to abortion to nuclear war—theoretically could be justified by an appeal to "conscience." In such instances, we can be sure that the "conscience" in question either is very poorly formed or is merely an expression of obstinate and erroneous opinion.

## CLOSURE

Have the students read the entire examination of conscience presented in the *Supplementary Reading* for this chapter and have them write about points they found that were surprising to them—things they did not realize were sins.

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- Study Questions 13–20 (p. 96)
- Practical Exercises 7–9 (p. 98)
- Workbook Questions 12–14
- Read "Principles of Conscience" through "The Malformed Conscience" (pp. 84–86)

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Read and discuss the messages contained in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (*Supplementary Reading 4*, pp. 89–90).

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What are the two elements of sincere repentance?  
Contrition, or sorrow for our sins, and purpose of amendment, or the intention to avoid sin in the future, are two elements.
- Why is there little point in acknowledging our sins if we do not intend to eliminate them from our lives?  
We would just turn around and commit the same sins again.
- How does an examination of conscience and repentance lead naturally to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?  
Sins identified through an interior examination of conscience are orally confessed and forgiven in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.



If we are certain of our conscience, we must obey it.

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed. (CCC 1790)

If a "certain conscience" is obeyed but is later found to be in error, then the judgment is a matter of either vincible ignorance or invincible ignorance. Recalling these definitions, two types of ignorance result from inadequate knowledge. However, whereas invincible ignorance comes through no fault of the individual so afflicted, vincible ignorance results from negligence to seek out the necessary information or from a habit of sin that effectively has blinded the conscience. Errors arising from vincible ignorance are sinful.

## THE MALFORMED CONSCIENCE

Although many errors of conscience stem from bad formation early in life, a correctly formed conscience can also suffer harm at any age and by many causes if true vigilance is not maintained through regular examination of conscience, prayer, and continued formation.

**The problem: The conscience can be distorted.** Conscience and judgment can be corrupted and distorted for many reasons. Some of the most common causes are those set forth in the *Catechism*:

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. (CCC 1792)

**The problem: Moral relativism causes confusion.** Moral relativism, which views all moral truths as subjective and changeable, has pervaded the mindset of many in modern society. This has resulted in the malformation of conscience in many instances. Some of the popular rallying points in the arena of sexual morality and sanctity of life are derived from moral relativism and are in flagrant opposition to the moral truths of human dignity.

Yet, these erroneous beliefs are often forcefully asserted as being truly beneficial for the rights and dignity of the human person.

**The problem: Cultural trends often oppose moral truth.** It is important to note that what human reason considers as inherently wrong is frequently seen as an undeniable right by popular culture. Many would maintain that abortion, legal partnerships between homosexual couples, extramarital sexual relationships, and assisted suicide fall under the category of "human rights." These opinions are based on the erroneous notion that morality is relative, subjective, and changeable. In many instances, a "morality" dictated by popular culture can deceptively be proclaimed as a new universal standard that demands acceptance by all. Often, conscience is cited as a justification for patently immoral behavior.<sup>13</sup>



Controversial issues often oppose moral truth... based on the erroneous notion that morality is relative, subjective, and changeable.

## Principles of Conscience and the Malformed Conscience (pp. 84–86)

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ☐ An appeal to conscience does not justify all viewpoints
- ☐ Obedience owed to a well-formed conscience; and malformation of conscience
- ☐ Moral relativism confuses conscience and cultural trends can oppose moral truth
- ☐ Habitual error and conscience

### BASIC QUESTIONS

- ☐ Does conscience justify everything?
- ☐ What is owed to a well-formed conscience and how does conscience become malformed?
- ☐ What is the effect of moral relativism and negative cultural trends on conscience?
- ☐ What effect do bad habits have on conscience?

### KEY IDEAS

- ☐ While we must not be forced to act contrary to conscience an appeal to "conscience" does not justify all viewpoints.
- ☐ If we are certain of our conscience, we must obey it. If our conscience is later found to be in error, then our judgment is a matter of either vincible or invincible ignorance.
- ☐ Conscience can become malformed.
- ☐ Cultural trends often oppose moral truth. What Divine Revelation declares inherently wrong is sometimes seen as an undeniable right by popular culture.
- ☐ Repeated errors can become habits. When the conscience is repeatedly ignored, it eventually becomes numb to wrongdoing and ceases to function as it should.

### ANTICIPATORY SET

Have the students write for five minutes on how regular examination of conscience, prayer, and ongoing formation are three powerful weapons for living a good moral life.

Examination of conscience keeps you sensitive, especially to bad behavior that may be creeping into your life. Prayer helps you know God, which makes you want to obey his will and the moral law. Continued formation deepens your understanding of the entire spiritual life and how it all works together and makes sense.

### GUIDED EXERCISE

Conduct a **think/pair/share** on the following question:

- ☐ What is usually behind vincible ignorance?

It is usually negligence in seeking out the necessary information or a habit of sin that has effectively blinded the conscience.



## GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Turn to page 100c for an activity to clarify knowledge of typical reasons conscience becomes distorted.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ What is an example of an apparent contradiction in regard to following one's conscience?

*We must obey our consciences even though they may be wrong. This is why we have the obligation of forming our consciences.*

- ❑ Why does an appeal to conscience not automatically justify an act or viewpoint?

*Our conscience may be very poorly formed or we may be obstinately expressing an erroneous opinion.*

## CLOSURE

Have the students write a **paragraph** on the principle of conscience presented in this lesson he or she thinks is the most important and why.

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- ❑ Study Questions 21–28 (p. 96–97)
- ❑ Practical Exercises 10–13 (pp. 98–99)
- ❑ Workbook Questions 15–17
- ❑ Read “The Conscience and our Obligation to Others” through “Conclusion” (pp. 86–88)

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Have the students write a **paragraph** on the deformation of conscience using the completed *Graphic Organizer* employed in this lesson.

**The problem: Repeated errors can soon become habit.** Conscience is like the nerve endings on our fingers. If we put our hands in a bucket filled with ice, we feel a painful chill on contact and are likely to pull our hands out of the bucket. If we ignore the signals of pain and keep our hands in the ice bucket, eventually the nerve endings will become numb and we will not feel pain anymore. Although desensitized to the sensation of pain, our fingers will suffer severe and permanent damage if we keep our hands in the bucket too long.

If we steal in spite of a protesting conscience, we will eventually be able to steal without any moral qualms—we lose our sense of sin, and with it the sense of guilt and regret. When conscience is repeatedly ignored, it eventually becomes numb to wrongdoing and ceases to function as it should. We begin to justify sinful behavior and deceive ourselves into thinking that our situation, for whatever reason, is a valid exception to the moral law.

## THE CONSCIENCE AND OUR OBLIGATION TO OTHERS

It is fair to say that the pitfalls to forming a good conscience are many. We know that we, as Christians and especially as Catholics, must form and nurture our conscience with prayerful attention to the moral law. In order to handle and overcome the contradictory moral messages permeating society and popular culture and the effects of spiritual apathy among others, the moral positions of the Church must be presented and understood by all. First, we must understand Church teaching ourselves, and then we must be prepared to explain and defend it when necessary. This is part of the call of the baptized to both live the Faith we have received and to evangelize the world.

Moral issues are often the topic of discussion in the classroom, at the dinner table, in the media, and around the workplace. The lay faithful present in these contexts may represent the only voice capable of guiding others to the truth, beginning with a more profound understanding of the natural law. Since every person is endowed with the capacity to reason and thus is capable of understanding truth, it would be insufficient for us to simply exhibit the moral law as a set of rules to be obeyed. Invoking a rule simply because it is a rule, even if it comes from God, is not nearly as effective as communicating a moral principle in a gentle but convincing manner.

The moral teachings of the Church are not unreasonable rules, but rather directives that make eminent sense. Given the moral controversies in modern society, the followers of Christ must be especially prepared to articulate the Church's teachings in a kind yet persuasive way.



*We must understand Church teaching ourselves and be prepared to explain and defend it when necessary.*

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- ❑ Why must we obey our conscience if we are certain of its dictates?

*If we do not obey our consciences, we condemn ourselves by making choices that we ourselves consider immoral.*

- ❑ What is an example of confusion caused by moral relativism?

*If a poor, unmarried woman is pregnant, it would be merciful for the woman to have an abortion so the unwanted baby will not have to suffer. The difficulties the mother has to bear and the imagined future difficulties of the child will justify the abortion.*

- ❑ How does repeated stealing relate to the fact that repeated errors can soon become habit?

*If you continue to steal, despite a protesting conscience, you will soon lose all sense of guilt and regret. You will begin to believe it is your right to take what you need and find arguments to justify it.*



Christ Carrying the Cross by Titian.  
The "law of the gift" signifies that every person has a vocation to love as Christ loves.

## CONSCIENCE AND THE NEW COMMANDMENT

Though it is true that a good conscience finds its inspiration in the moral law and its many applications taught by the Church, it must also be motivated by the universal call to holiness and the desire to imitate Christ.

The Second Vatican Council made it abundantly clear that being baptized signifies being called to imitate the life of Christ. The radical mandate to love as Jesus Christ loved must serve as the guiding principle for every action. The Christian conscience must not only judge or determine a course of action according to its compatibility with the Ten Commandments, but also in light of the example of Christ as seen in the Gospels.

The prudent follower of Christ must invoke his conscience with the perennial question: "What action will be best?" or "What action would Christ want me to choose?" The question behind the popular "What if?" wristbands that still circulate today is actually an extremely valid one that should be part of any deliberation of conscience: "What would Jesus do?" Conscience, formed according to the love of Christ, will make charity with others a priority and the constant companion for every righteous action.

Pope John Paul II often spoke of a higher law peculiar to the Christian, which is the "law of the gift." The "law of the gift" signifies that every person has a vocation to love as Christ loves. Only by giving oneself totally to God and sacrificing oneself for others can our best self emerge. The late John Paul II was a wonderful witness of that "law of gift." Indeed, the fullness of conscience involves a clear awareness that every Christian is called to become a saint. "Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."<sup>14</sup>

## The Conscience: Final Thoughts

(pp. 86–88)

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ☐ The obligation to explain and defend the moral law
- ☐ The universal call to holiness

### BASIC QUESTIONS

- ☐ Why does every Christian have the duty to explain and defend the moral law?
- ☐ What is the universal call to holiness?

### KEY IDEAS

- ☐ All Catholics must be prepared to explain and defend the moral law when necessary. This should be done in a kind yet persuasive way, not representing the Law as mere rules but as eminently sensible moral principles. We may be the only people available to bring this message to those around us.
- ☐ The fullness of conscience involves a clear awareness that every Christian is called through Baptism to become a saint: "Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect."

### ANTICIPATORY SET

Incorporate CCC 1783 into the class's **opening prayer** (*Supplementary Reading 1*, p. 89).

Have the students write on the following questions:

- ☐ In what matter discussed in this reading do I have to grow the most?
- ☐ If I disagree with anything here, what duty do I have to resolve this disagreement so that I can have a clear conscience?

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Have the students work with a **partner** to take turns presenting the Catholic argument on some moral question in a kind but convincing way.

## GUIDED EXERCISE

Conduct a **think/pair/share** on the following question:

- Why is the question "WWJD?" extremely valid in regard to formation of conscience?

"WWJD?" or "What would Jesus do?" is an extremely valid question in regard to formation of conscience because the ultimate goal and motivation for a Christian is not to fulfill a set of abstract moral principles but to imitate the life of Christ and thereby become a saint.

## CLOSURE

Write a **paragraph** explanation and defense of a moral doctrine that is in dispute today.

## HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

- Study Questions 29–32 (p. 97)
- Practical Exercises 14–15 (p. 99)
- Workbook Questions 18–23

## ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

**Free write** for five minutes on things you think you can do to live your baptismal call better to seek holiness.

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,<sup>15</sup> 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. (*Veritatis Splendor*, 64)

## CONCLUSION

Conscience is the practical judgment on the morality of a given action. It leads a person either to perform an action or to refrain from carrying it out. As a faculty of reason, conscience must humbly seek the truth guided by the teachings of the Church. Every person has the obligation to form his or her conscience according to the objective standards of God's law and Christ's teachings. Fidelity to a right and true conscience is a concrete way of being faithful to God himself.

A properly formed conscience perfects and cultivates a person's dignity and chooses actions that lead to true happiness. The Magisterium of the Church is the most certain guide to the will of God and therefore must play a vital role in forming one's conscience.

As a way of life, the words of St. Paul are worth noting: "Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day."<sup>16</sup> The greatest happiness, according to classical thought, is to have a well-formed and clear conscience.



St. Paul Preaching in Athens by Raphael.  
The Magisterium of the Church is the most certain guide to the will of God and therefore must play a vital role in forming one's conscience.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What is our first obligation toward others and ourselves in regard to the moral law?  
We should understand it and be able to explain it to others.
- Why is it important for the lay faithful, even teens, to understand the moral law?  
We may be the only people available to present these truths to others.
- How should we present the moral law to others?  
It is not as a mere set of rules to be obeyed but as eminently sensible moral principles that will bring us happiness.
- What kind of tone ought we to adopt in communicating Catholic moral teachings?  
We should use a kind, but convincing, manner.



## SUPPLEMENTARY READING

## 1. THE CONSCIENCE MUST BE INFORMED

Conscience must be informed and reason 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 creator 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.

—CCC 1783

## 2. THE CONSCIENCE IS A PRECIOUS BUT DELICATE GUIDE

Conscience is a precious but delicate guide. Its voice is easily distorted or obscured. To listen to conscience is to silence and, eventually, to destroy it. Conscience must be listened to and listened to sensitively. It needs to be interrogated, even to be cross-examined.

Especially those who habitually interrogate their conscience and are ready to pay heed need to be awkward answers, will not cheat their conscience or be cheated by it.

—Cormack Burke,  
*Conscience and Freedom*, 25.

## 3. RECTITUDE AND CLARITY OF CONSCIENCE

First of all, an indispensable condition is the rectitude and clarity of the penitent's conscience. People cannot come to true and genuine repentance until they recognize that as a contrary to the ethical norm written in their innermost being; until they admit that they have a personal and responsible responsibility of this contrast; until they say not only that "sin exists" but also "I have sinned," and they admit that sin has introduced a division into their conscience which then pervades their whole being and separates them from God and from their brothers and

sisters. The sacramental sign of this clarity of conscience is the act traditionally called the examination of conscience, an act that must never be one of anxious psychological introspection, but a sincere and calm comparison with the interior moral law, with the evangelical moral norms proposed by the Church, with Jesus Christ himself who is our Teacher and Model of life, and with the heavenly Father, who calls us to goodness and perfection.

—*Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*, 31

## 4. THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

And [Jesus] said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and

## SUPPLEMENTARY READING

from CCC 1783:

- A well-formed conscience judges according to reason enlightened by the revealed wisdom of the Creator.
- Our conscience must be educated because of negative influences within and around us.

from Cormack Burke,  
*Conscience and Freedom*:

- Conscience is a delicate guide because misusing it can distort, obscure, silence, or destroy it. It must be listened to sensitively.
- Conscience must be interrogated or cross-examined, like a witness in court, to find out what it is really saying.
- Sometimes the answers conscience gives are awkward because it does not always say what one wants to hear and may not be giving one the objectively right answer.

from *Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*:

- People cannot come to true and genuine repentance until they say not only that "sin exists" but also "I have sinned."
- Clarity of conscience comes from a sincere and calm comparison of one's actions with the interior moral law.