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CHAPTER 2

***Moral Acts, Passions,
and Conscience***

“Do to others whatever you would have
them do to you.”

MATTHEW 7:12



What Do You Think?

Based on the principles you learned in chapter 1, write “R” if the following are right (moral) or “W” if they are wrong (immoral). Give reasons for your opinion.

1. While classes are in session, you drive fifteen miles over the speed limit in the school zone of a primary school.
2. The dean of discipline at your high school searches student lockers for drugs. He does so without getting the students’ permission.
3. An aptitude test reveals that you have tremendous musical ability. However, you refuse to take any music lessons when your mother suggests you do so.

James Patterson and Peter Kim wrote a fascinating book entitled *The Day America Told the Truth*. It reports the following:

- Ninety-one percent of the people in the study lie on a regular basis, both at home and at work.
- The majority of employees admit to goofing off on the job on the average of seven hours per week.
- Half of the workers admit to calling in sick regularly even if they feel well.
- Twenty-five percent say they would be willing to leave their families if offered \$10 million to do so; 23 percent would be willing to act as prostitutes for a week for that same amount; and 7 percent would agree to murder a stranger.
- Only 13 percent hold that all ten commandments are relevant today and binding on people!

Do these statistics surprise you? Frighten you? Explain.



KEY TERMS

circumstances
conscience
intention
Magisterium
object
passions

An antidote to these scary statistics is a healthy dose of people of conscience—those willing to discover and then *do* the right thing. Of course, we all hope that others would recognize us as persons of conscience of whom it could be said: “When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so when you die, the world cries and you rejoice.” This chapter will discuss the morality of human actions, passions, and the meaning of a Christian conscience.

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1749–1775)

The Sources of Morality

Because we have freedom, we are responsible for our acts and our failures to act. We can judge whether our actions are good or bad by reflecting on three traditional sources of morality. These sources are the object chosen, the end or intention, and the circumstances surrounding the action.

Object Chosen

The object is *what* we do—the act itself. An example of a good act would be something that involves good matter, for example, tutoring a classmate in math. Another example is giving money to Catholic Relief Services to help the victims of an earthquake. “Bad” matter does not

conform to our true good. It automatically makes an act evil. For example, trashing a person’s reputation contradicts a person’s right to a good name; it is evil because *what* we do is wrong.

Objective norms of morality help us judge whether something is good or evil, whether it is in harmony with God’s will or is contrary to it. Human reason and the law of conscience enlighten us to these norms.

Some actions by their very nature are always seriously wrong. Examples of such actions are blasphemy, perjury, adultery, and murder. Neither a good intention nor the circumstances surrounding the action can make these evil actions morally good!

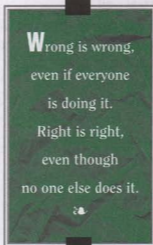
Intention

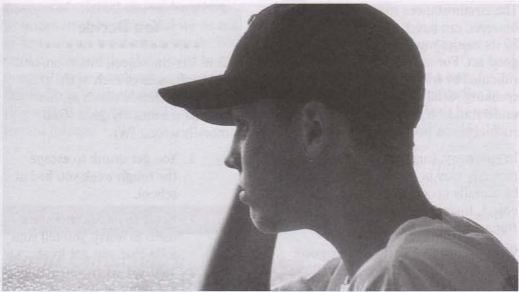
Our intention is the motive or purpose or end for which we choose to do the act. Rooted in our will, our intention answers *why* we acted a certain way. It is a key element in assessing the morality of our actions. For example, you tutor a classmate in math because she is a friend and you want her to do well on the upcoming test. In this

example, what is done *and* why it is performed are both good. This act is good.

Our intentions may also be mixed. For example, you may give money to the missions for two reasons. First, you wish to help the poor. But you also want to be praised for your generosity—a less than worthy motive.

Our intention is not always limited to just one act. It can also guide a





series of actions that are working toward the same purpose. For example, a person may be performing a series of acts to rob a bank. The morality of all the person's preliminary acts—which might appear morally acceptable—are tainted because they are motivated by the evil motive of theft.

A major principle of Catholic moral theology centers on the intention behind what we choose to do. This principle is: The end does not justify the means. Stated another way: *A good intention can never turn an intrinsically bad action into a just one.* For example, you may cheat to get a higher grade so you can get into a “good” college. Wanting to go to a good college is certainly a worthy motive; however, cheating is a bad action. A good reason for doing something does not make an evil action morally right. Your good intention may never justify choosing to do something that is by its nature wrong.

The reverse is also true: A bad intention can turn a good act into an evil one. For example, suppose you compliment someone simply because

you want to use that person for a letter of recommendation. In this case, you are insincere and are deceitfully using that person to get something you want. You are not treating that person with the respect due him or her. Your motive, or intention, is tainted—though paying a compliment is usually a good act.

Circumstances

Circumstances include the act's consequences and the context within which it is done. The object included the what; and the intention, the why. The circumstances include the *how, who, when, and where* of the act.

Circumstances can lessen or increase our blameworthiness for an act. Ignorance, fear, duress, and other psychological and social factors can lessen or nullify our responsibility for our actions. For example, the overwhelming fear of our being sued that kept us from helping a dying victim at an accident scene could greatly diminish our moral responsibility for not helping someone in need when we could have.

The circumstances surrounding an act, however, can never change an act that is by its nature morally evil into a morally good act. For example, a fear of being ridiculed by friends does not justify our speaking racial slurs. Our fear might be understandable, but our cooperation in such acts can never be justified.

In summary, this principle of Christian morality may be stated: For an act to be morally good and acceptable, the object, intention (or end), and circumstances must all be good.

What I do (the object) must be good; why I do it (the intention) and all the surrounding circumstances must also be good. It is wrong to claim an action is good based solely on one's intention or the circumstances and context. We may never choose to do an evil act so good can come from it.

Role of Passions

Passions are our feelings or emotions. They move us to act or not to act in relation to something we feel or imagine to be either good or evil. The most basic passion is love. Love is aroused by and attracted to what is good. Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that love consists in willing the good of another human being.

Other passions, or emotions, include hatred, joy, sadness, desire, fear, and anger. Passions by themselves are neither good nor evil. Our emotions can help us do good or do bad. For example, anger at racial discrimination can motivate us to do something to combat prejudice. Anger, on the other hand, can contribute to our acting wrongly; for example, striking out at a younger sibling who might be annoying us.

You Decide

.....
Consider the object, intention, and circumstances of each of the following. Decide which of these actions are morally good (G) or morally wrong (W).

- ___ 1. You get drunk to escape the tough week you had at school.
- ___ 2. Because you did not want them to worry, you tell your folks that you got in at 1:00 A.M. when you actually got home at 2:30 A.M.
- ___ 3. Prison officials give an experimental AIDS vaccine to some lifers without their knowledge to find a cure for AIDS.

■
.... Discuss what makes each act right or wrong.

Because of original sin, we have been wounded in our nature, and we do not always use our emotions properly. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to gain mastery of our emotions so we can use our feelings to strengthen our relationship with God and respond lovingly toward others.

(CCC, 1776–1789, 1795–1800, 1802)

Moral Conscience

God gave us a conscience to make and evaluate the moral rightness or wrongness of a concrete act. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines conscience as:

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

The Second Vatican Council tells us that our conscience is the most secret core of who we are; it is the sanctuary where we meet God. In its depths we are alone with God and can hear his call to do good and avoid evil, to live as he, our Abba, our Father, intends us to live.

The Role of Our Conscience

Conscience, then, helps us figure out whether an action or attitude is good or evil, whether it conforms to God's will or contradicts it. Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make a right judgment or an erroneous judgment. We can choose to follow

What the Documents Say

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 (see Romans 2:15–16). His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.¹

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 16

Discuss: What does it mean to say that we meet God in the sanctuary of our conscience? What are the implications of this teaching for forming a well-formed conscience?

¹PIUS XII, radio message on rightly forming the Christian conscience in youth, March 23, 1952.

reason and God's Law or we can choose not to follow them.

Conscience helps us understand the principles of morality and apply them to concrete situations. It helps us judge whether something is good or evil both *before* and *after* we do it. Conscience makes us responsible for our acts. It is conscience that tells us to repent if we have sinned and turned against the Lord and his law of love.

Two Principles of Conscience: Form It and Follow It

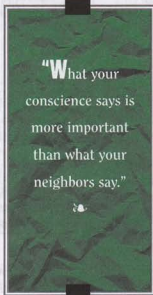
Catholic theology has taught two important rules concerning moral decision making:

- ❑ Continually form your conscience.
- ❑ Always follow the certain judgment of your well-formed conscience.

Continual formation of our conscience is a lifelong responsibility that requires a certain degree of *interiority*. This means that we need to develop the ability to quiet down and take a good hard look at our lives before God.

A well-formed conscience is both upright and truthful—two qualities that will bring peace of mind. We must take our responsibility to form our conscience according to the “true good willed by the wisdom” of our Creator. We must take seriously the following:

- ❑ Conscience forms its judgments using human reason, which can help us discover God’s goodness and truth.
- ❑ It looks to the Word of God—Jesus—who teaches by his example and his biblical preaching how to live virtuous lives.
- ❑ It looks to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as the prime example of how to love and obey God’s will.
- ❑ It seeks guidance from official church teachers and wise and holy people.
- ❑ It is attuned to the gifts of the Holy Spirit which strengthen us to live upright lives.



A continuously well-formed conscience will **DECIDE** to do the right thing. It will:

- D**—**ig** out the facts.
- E**—**xercise** imagination to figure out alternatives and effects.
- C**—**onsider** the wisdom of others.
- I**—**mitate** Jesus.
- D**—**ecide** to do right.
- E**—**valuate** the decision you made.

Dig Out the Facts. Studying the facts of a proposed action is a prime way to use human reason to discover the truth and the good. Simply by asking questions like *What? Why? Who? Where? When?* and *How?*, we can unearth the moral good or evil in a proposed action. For example, if I find that I have an evil intention (the *why* question), then I know that it would be wrong to perform a particular act. Or if I discover that the *how* is an evil means, then I judge that my proposed action is not morally good.

Exercise Imagination.

The human spirit includes the faculty of imagination as well as rational thought. Our imagination can help us discover alter-

native courses to a proposed action. For example, cheating is not the *only* way to pass a test. We can always ask for extra help, join a study group, or ask for an extra day to prepare to take it. These are three morally good alternatives; cheating is not.

Imagination can also help us discover both foreseen and unforeseen effects of a proposed action. Say you are considering gossiping and spreading false rumors about someone. Your sharing of rumors will hurt the person's reputation. But your imagination might also lead you to discover the unforeseen result that you might damage your own name. A friend who hears you gossiping may judge you to be untrustworthy and never confide in you in the future.

Consider the wisdom of other people.

As Catholics we look to the Magisterium for moral guidance. We believe that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in knowing and teaching us what is morally good and what is morally evil. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Magisterium applies both revelation and reason to contemporary issues, pointing out the moral goodness or evil of laws and other social, economic, and political policies.

We also look to others for advice. We turn to the wisdom of our parents, grandparents, and other family members. We seek the advice of priests, those in religious life, and other leaders in our parish community. Saints also serve as our moral guides. We read about the lives of the saints to learn about the decisions they made.

We also recognize and follow the wisdom found in laws that respect the dignity of persons and promote the true good of society. We think of good laws as the written wisdom of those who have gone before us or our contemporary leaders. As we will see in chapter 4, the natural law and the divine law are the two most important sources of forming our conscience correctly.

**Sure Guide:
The Magisterium**
(CCC, 2030–2040, 2049–2051)

Jesus gave the Church the responsibility to teach truth. The pope and the bishops teach with the authority of Christ. The teaching office of the Church resides in the Magisterium and extends to all elements of doctrine, including moral doctrine.

“The law of God entrusted to the Church is taught to the faithful as the way of life and truth” (CCC, 2037). We have a duty to observe the official teachings of the pope and the bishops who teach lovingly and in a spirit of service. In faith and prayer, we make the Church's teachings part of our daily lives. We form our conscience in light of these teachings because they are meant for our salvation.

Research some of the moral teachings of the Church. List them here.

Can my conscience ever be wrong?

(CCC, 1790–1794, 1801)

Because we are human we can make mistakes when judging the morality of particular actions. We can err. Many factors can contribute to an erroneous conscience. For example:

- ❑ Ignorance—not knowing the right thing to do—can lead us to make false judgments. Sometimes our lack of knowledge is not our fault, so our blameworthiness is diminished. At other times we are to blame for being ignorant because we did not make a very good effort to discover the truth or the good or we simply refused to heed official church teaching on moral issues. We permitted ourselves to be blinded by the habit of sin.
- ❑ Emotions can also muddy up conscientious decisions. We must work to master—with God’s help—our passions, or emotions, and use them to do good.

A test of sincerity in conscience formation is to take the necessary steps to make a good decision, to correct a conscience that is in error, and to clear up any doubts we may have before making a decision. We are sincere when we also learn from our mistakes; for example, by avoiding those situations that have inflamed our emotions or caused poor judgment in the past.

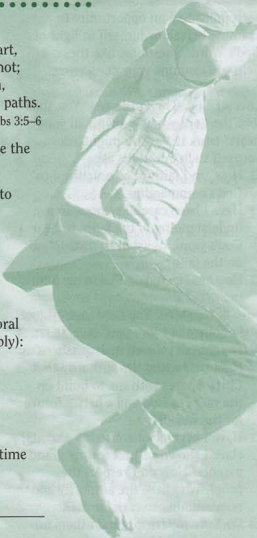
Imitate Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world. We believe he is the Way, the Light, and the Truth. A close friendship with Jesus Christ is the foundation of our living a moral life and growing in holiness—in our relationship with the Holy Trinity. We can gain insight and courage to choose good and avoid evil by praying to Jesus and asking for the gift of his Holy Spirit.

Decide to do right. Eventually, after you have studied the issue, consulted the wisdom of the Church and other wise people, prayed and looked to Jesus, you must decide. Cooperating with the Holy Spirit’s gifts and following the steps taken above, the time will come when we must choose. When it does, we are to follow this rule: “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience” (CCC, 1800).

Evaluate. Good decisions can strengthen our character and help us increase in the virtues. Saint James writes: “So for one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, it is a sin” (James 4:17). Conscience helps us evaluate our decisions. If we have done the right thing, we have learned how to decide in similar situations in the future. If we have violated the dictates of our conscience, our conscience convicts us after the fact. It can move us to repent and help us resolve not to sin in the future.

A good conscience flows from true faith, a faith rooted in Christ’s love.

Making a Decision



The Word of God offers us this advice:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
on your own intelligence rely not;
In all your ways be mindful of him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6

After reflecting on this passage complete the following:

1. The toughest moral decision for me to deal with usually involves:
2. When it is time for me to make a moral decision, I usually (check all that apply):
 - a. give it little thought
 - b. ask advice
 - c. pray
 - d. agonize over it for a long time
 - e. follow the crowd
 - f. other: _____

Making a Conscientious Decision

How would you resolve this dilemma?

A cashier in a music store at the mall completes the transaction for your purchase of a CD by giving you a ten-dollar bill and some change. She meant to give you a one-dollar bill and some change. She does not notice her mistake.

An Examination of Conscience

An examination of conscience gives each individual an opportunity to examine herself or himself in light of God's Word. Questions, like these, will help you examine your conscience.

Love of God. The Lord says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Mark 12:30). You might ask yourself such questions as:

- How am I faithful or unfaithful to God's commandments?
- Have I been careful to grow in my understanding of the faith, to hear God's word, to listen to instructions on the faith?
- How am I including God in my future?

Love of Neighbor. The Lord says, "[L]ove one another as I love you" (John 15:12). You might ask yourself such questions as:

- How am I using the authority that Christ shares with me to build up the reign of God and a better future for the world?
- Have I been obedient to my parents? Have I shown respect for my grandparents? How do I respect the people who have the authority and responsibility to care for me?
- Do I use my friends and others for my own ends?
- Do I do my best to help victims of oppression, people who are homeless, people living in poverty?

Love of Self. Christ our Lord says, "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Ask yourself such questions as:

- Where is my life going?
- What use have I made of time, of health and strength, of the gifts God has given me?

Based on *Rite of Penance*

REVIEW

IMPORTANT TERMS TO KNOW

circumstances—the context and consequences of a moral act—the who, how, when, and where of the act

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

intention—the motive or purpose for a moral act—the why of the act

Magisterium—the official teaching authority in the Church, consisting of the pope and the bishops in communion with him. In the area of morality, the Magisterium has the Christ-given right and duty to proclaim who we are and what we should be before God (see CCC, 2036).

object—the matter of an act: what we do—the what of the act

passions—our feelings or emotions that move us to act or not to act

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we looked at some principles of the Church's moral teaching and Jesus' guidance to learn how to form our conscience and choose correctly. We learned that:

1. The sources of the morality of every human act are the object, the intention, and the circumstances.
2. Some actions are always wrong because they are contrary to our good and God's will.
3. A good intention for an action cannot justify evil means to attain it.
4. Passions are emotions that move us to act or not act in relation to something we feel or imagine to be good or evil. They are neither good nor evil.
5. Conscience is the judgment of reason that enables us to determine the moral quality of a concrete act. It operates before we act, during our act, and after we act.
6. We have the responsibility to form our conscience according to reason and true good willed by God, the Creator. We must always follow our conscience.
7. It is possible for us to form an erroneous conscience. Factors like ignorance, emotion, peer pressure, total self-reliance, a cold heart, and the like, can contribute to an erroneous conscience. Ignorance is not always free of guilt.
8. The Magisterium of the Church has Christ-given authority to teach how to live a moral life in accord with God's will.

EXPLORING OUR CATHOLIC FAITH

1. Listening to God's Word

Read and reflect on Mark 10:17–22. What choice did Jesus offer the young man? How did he respond? What might have been some of the factors that led the young man to his decision?

2. Understanding the Teachings of the Catholic Church

Pope John Paul II taught: "The primary and decisive element for moral judgment is the object of the human act, which establishes whether it is *capable of being ordered to the good and to the ultimate end, which is God*" (*The Splendor of Truth*, 79). Explain what this teaching means.

3. Reflecting on Our Catholic Faith

Someone offered this insight: "Wrong is wrong, even if everyone is doing it. Right is right, even though no one else does it." Does this insight guide you in making moral decisions? Write your thoughts in your journal.

4. Living Our Catholic Faith

Review the DECIDE steps for making a moral decision. Choose a situation that you are facing and apply the steps.