

Conscience

People are often confused when they hear the word *conscience*. One reason for this is that they often understand conscience as a thing, as something we possess. In fact, conscience is more of an activity, something we do. In his encyclical *Splendor of Truth*, Pope John Paul II stated that “the relationship between man’s freedom and God’s law is most deeply lived out in the ‘heart’ of the person, in his moral conscience.”⁶ What did the pope mean? Think of a spectrum where at one end is complete free will (or license) and at the other is God’s revealed law. Throughout one’s life, the Church asserts, humans continually move back and forth along this spectrum. Sometimes we find ourselves closer to God’s law while at other times we find ourselves moving toward complete free will. This moving back and forth along the spectrum is illustrative of the relationship between our free will and God’s law, and conscience is where this relationship is played out. Stated differently, conscience is the place deep within the human heart where we meet God and freely respond to his law.

Now, what exactly is God’s law and how can one follow it? As we discussed in chapter 1, the Catholic Church teaches that God’s law, or the eternal law, is knowable to God alone. However, in order that we can “know” the good and live fulfilling lives, God wills that we know some aspects of this eternal law and apply it in our lives. Thus, God reveals certain elements of the eternal law to us through our capacity to reason. This is the natural law. Natural law is defined as human participation in God’s eternal law through our capacity to reason, or the law “written on the human heart” by God.⁷

With this understanding of the natural law in mind, we can now speak more directly about conscience. Conscience bears witness to the authority of the natural law and to the first principle of practical reason: do good and avoid evil. From the Church’s perspective, conscience involves us utilizing our capacity to reason in order to respond to God and to what God reveals about correct moral behavior. Thus, there is an important relationship at work here: the natural law makes known the objective and universal demands of the moral good, while conscience is the application of this law to a particular case.⁸ What exactly does this mean? It means simply that the conscience and the natural law need each other. Conscience needs the natural law (reason) in order to “know” the moral good, while natural law needs conscience in order to apply this good to specific situations. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explains this relationship by stating that conscience “is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.”⁹

With this basic understanding of what conscience is, we can now explore how we form our conscience to choose the good. The Roman Catholic tradition ascribes three dimensions to conscience: (1) *synderesis*, the basic capacity within the human person to understand value; (2) *moral science*, the process of discovering the particular good to be done or the evil to be avoided; and (3) *judgment*, the specific determination of the good that one must do in a particular situation, has done in a past situation, or will do in the future. Let us examine these three dimensions in greater detail.

Synderesis is the term that describes our innate knowledge of universal moral principles, or the disposition of our practical intellect to understand moral truth.¹⁰ *Synderesis* is the necessary foundation for the exercise of conscience because it is the capacity by which we understand value. Through *synderesis* we always and everywhere choose what we perceive to be beneficial or “good” for us, and avoid what we perceive to be detrimental or “evil.” The key to understanding this concept is the word *perceive*. At the level of *synderesis*, we perceive that which seems to be beneficial for us in the here-and-now even though this choice may not be “good” in the moral sense. Let’s use an example to illustrate this. Mindy has a distorted body image; she sees herself as overweight even though she is



not. So what can Mindy do? She can starve herself (anorexia) or binge and purge herself (bulimia). Both options are destructive to her body and she should avoid them, but for Mindy they are both beneficial—or “good”—in her misguided pursuit of an unrealistic body shape. Or take the case of Joshua, who would like to play varsity football but knows he is too small. One option for Joshua is to take steroids in order to gain size and strength. In spite of their effects on both his body and mind, Joshua recognizes the steroids as beneficial—a “good” to be pursued—toward his overall goal of playing football. Or consider an extreme example: suicide. A person seeking to end his or her life does not view death as something to be avoided. Instead, suicide is perceived as beneficial—and thus “good”—because it provides a means to end unbearable physical or psychic suffering.

In each of these cases, options that most of us would consider objectively evil are perceived by the person to be “good.” They are perceived as good because they help the person achieve a particular goal, regardless of the negative consequences they may bring. Because the person always seeks the “good,” we can say that *synderesis* is infallible, it never errs. We never choose what we perceive to be detrimental to us; we only choose what we perceive to be beneficial. Clearly this basic capacity to understand value needs to be formed if we are to act in morally good ways. This process of formation is called *moral science*.

Moral science is the process that shapes, educates, examines, and transforms *synderesis*. It is the means by which we learn whether a particular option is, in fact, good or evil. Now moral science, also termed “the formation of conscience,” does not take place in a vacuum. We humans have our feet in a number of different worlds and our culture—be it Western or some other culture—can either form our conscience or deform it. As an example of this, take our attitudes toward money. We Americans are very generous. We donate billions of dollars to charities both at home and abroad in order to help alleviate the plight of others. Yet at the same time our Western, capitalist economic structures may, without our even realizing it, impel us toward pursuing wealth and material gratification as ends in themselves. They might even desensitize us to systemic poverty both in our own country and around the world. The point is that our conscience can be both formed and deformed by our culture’s view of money.

Cultures are not only national in nature. Within every culture there exists any number of subcultures: country clubs, universities, trade unions, political organizations, Goths, and so on. Each of these subcultures is also able to form our view of what is good and evil, and thus our conscience. Likewise, parents, extended families, and friends can play a significant role in the formation of our conscience, as can the media and the academic disciplines, insofar as these disciplines strive to discover truth and what it means to be truly human. So how do these various sources help form (or deform) our conscience? Essentially we draw from them moral principles or norms concerning right and wrong behavior. For example, what do these sources inform us about starving or purging ourselves, taking steroids, ending our lives, or cheating on a financial accounting test? By drawing upon these sources, we begin to recognize the good we ought to do and the evil we ought to avoid. As a result, we come to learn the morally correct thing to do. Now it is true that these sources can give us conflicting messages. Most people, we hope, would inform Joshua that taking steroids is wrong, but he might get a different message from his teammates or even his coaches. The point here is that, at the level of *moral science*, we must draw upon various sources of moral knowledge in order to help us determine the right thing to do.

OK, if we have to draw from various sources of moral knowledge, how do we know which one is correct? How do we know which one to follow, particularly when we are receiving conflicting messages? As we saw in chapter 1, Catholics have two very important sources for the formation of conscience, (1) the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed through Scripture, and (2) the ongoing Tradition of the Church. When faced with a difficult ethical decision, Catholics are called to examine both Scripture and Tradition to learn the principles and values that God has revealed. These



revealed principles and values should guide one's decision-making process more than any other. Now how exactly does one do this? Where specifically within Scripture and Tradition does one find information on steroid use or cheating on tests? What happens if Scripture and Tradition do not specifically address an ethical dilemma that arises in one's life? Here we like to introduce a third "source" for the formation of conscience, the Church's magisterium.

The magisterium—derived from the Latin term *magistra*, meaning "teacher"—is the official teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The magisterium consists of the pope and the bishops of the Church who are in communion with him. Its task is to provide the faithful with an authentic interpretation of both Scripture and Tradition.¹¹ The Second Vatican Council spoke to the importance of the magisterium when it stated: "In forming their conscience the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. Her charge is to announce and teach authentically that truth which is Christ and at the same time with her authority to declare and confirm the principles of the moral order which derive from human nature itself."¹² From this short quote it is clear that for Catholics, the teachings of the magisterium are an essential source in the formation of conscience.

Exactly how are Catholics called to follow magisterial teachings? While the answer to this question is rather complex, the Church basically holds that if one wishes to be guided by God's truth, he or she must give *religious assent* to the teachings of the ordinary magisterium, even when the specific teaching has not been infallibly defined.¹³ What this means is that Catholics are to give the benefit of the doubt to the truthfulness of the Church's teaching regarding the moral law, particularly when the teaching holds a particular action to be intrinsically evil.¹⁴ The reason for this is that one's choice to commit an evil act would not only set one's freedom in opposition to God's law, but it would also separate one's freedom from God's Truth.¹⁵ In short, one becomes an authentically free human being—always choosing to do good while avoiding evil—to the extent that one allows oneself to be guided by truth.

It may seem from what we have just stated that authoritative, magisterial teachings can limit a Catholic's freedom of conscience. However, this is not the case. Cardinal Newman wrote that "conscience has rights because it has duties."¹⁶ This means that if Catholics have an obligation to follow their conscience (which the Church teaches they do), then they also have the equally important obligation of assuring that it is formed correctly. The formation of conscience certainly involves gaining information, but it also means gaining *truthful* information. John Paul II spoke to this by stating that the "maturity and responsibility" of conscience is measured not by personal autonomy or by a "liberation" of the conscience from God's objective truth. Instead, the true maturity and responsibility of conscience is measured by "an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions." He continued by affirming that the freedom of conscience "is never freedom 'from' the truth but always and only freedom 'in' the truth." In other words, the magisterium does not formulate moral truth and then impose it on the individual's conscience; instead it "brings to light" those truths that conscience should already know. In this sense, the Church and her magisterium are always at the service of conscience.¹⁷

Clearly, the formation of conscience is a complicated affair. It is complicated not only because of the many competing voices that can inform one's conscience, but also because these same voices can pull it in one direction or the other. Given these competing voices, how is one to exercise *judgment of conscience*? How is one to do good and avoid evil?

The third dimension of conscience concerns *judgment*. After one has been informed of what is truly "right" through the process of moral science, one must then make a concrete decision about how to act. Making this judgment of conscience seems easy enough—I should choose what I know to be morally good—however, this is not always easy. What if the "correct" course of action is difficult or



unpopular? What if I will be ostracized by my friends or ridiculed by society for my choice? Knowing *what* to do can be easy, actually making the judgment to do it often is not.

Judgment concerns the specific determination of the good that I must do in a present situation, but it concerns more than this. As we grow older—and hopefully wiser!—we can look back on our lives and critically evaluate the moral decisions we made in the past. Sometimes when we reflect back on these decisions we realize that, while at the time we thought we were making a correct moral decision, in reality we were not. Judgment also deals with future decisions. In light of past experience and with what we know today, we can anticipate what a correct moral judgment will be if we are faced with a similar situation in the future. Thus, the judgment of conscience can be defined as the specific determination of the good that I must do in a present situation, have done in a past situation, or will do in the future.

Another way to understand judgment of conscience is to look at Saint Paul's *Letter to the Romans*: "For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them" (Rom. 2:14–15). According to Saint Paul, conscience confronts the Christian with the law, understood as Jesus' dual command to love both God and neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40), and it becomes a witness for them as to whether they are faithful to this law or not. Because its judgments issue from the depth of the human heart, conscience is in fact the only witness to what takes place in the heart. It remains unknown to everyone except the individual and, from the Christian perspective, God. In this sense, the judgment of conscience is dialogical in nature. In one sense it is a dialogue within the individual person, but in another, much deeper sense it is also a dialogue between the person and God, the author of the moral law.¹⁸ The Second Vatican Council spoke to this dialogical understanding of conscience in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."¹⁹ Therefore, when one arrives at a judgment of conscience, one does not do so alone, but with God's voice calling one to obedience. As such, conscience does not command from its own authority, but rather from the authority of God. This is why the judgment of conscience is morally binding.

Endnotes

6. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 54.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 91, art. 2. See also Romans 2:14–15.
8. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 59.
9. CCC, no. 1778. See also *Splendor of Truth*, no. 59.
10. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14384a.htm>.
11. CCC, no. 85.
12. Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty* (1965), in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), no. 14.
13. CCC, no. 892, and Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964), in *Vatican II*, no. 25.
14. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964), no. 27, and John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 81.
15. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 56.
16. John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk: Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in the Catholic Teaching*, uniform ed. (Longman, Green and Company: London, 1868–1881), 2:250, cited in John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, no. 34.
17. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, nos. 61 and 64.
18. Cf. John Paul II, *Splendor of Truth*, nos. 57–58.



19. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), no. 16.

Excerpted from *Catholic Ethics in Today's World*, Revised Edition, by Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin, OSB (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011). Copyright © 2008, 2011 by Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.

