

Free Will

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The power of free will is an important element in Catholicism. As a human reality, free will provides the foundation for other important theological concepts. To explore the meaning and importance of free will, this article will discuss free will's connection to grace, conscience, character, and choice.

Grace

The term *grace* has a wide spectrum of expressions in common use: “God’s grace,” “your grace,” “the grace of the office,” “gracefulness,” “graced,” “graceful,” “sanctifying grace,” “full of grace,” “sacramental grace,” “state of grace,” “free grace,” “*sola gratia*,” and “cheap grace.”ⁱ Catholics often hear the term *grace* but really never reflect on its meaning (or at least this author does not); therefore, it may be worthwhile to discern the importance of grace regarding the concept of free will.

What Is Grace?

The theological construct of grace is rather difficult to pinpoint because it has several categories, such as “actual grace,” “cooperating grace,” “habitual grace,” “operating grace,” “sacramental grace,” and “sanctifying grace.” The fundamental definition of *grace* comes from the Latin word *gratia*, meaning “favor.”

Grace can be understood as any undeserved gift or help and lovingly provided by God in and through Jesus the Christ in faith. There are several scriptural references to God’s grace being freely bestowed upon humanity: Romans 3:21–26, 4:13–1,25; Ephesians 2:5–8; 1 Timothy 2:4–6. Grace is the mystery of God’s self-communication and self-revelation of empathy, compassion, and love.ⁱⁱ God gives every person the same amount of grace, but it is solely up to the individual person to “tap into” God’s grace. It is the ability and drive of the person that empowers him or her to turn ordinary events into extraordinary events—people such as Pope John XXIII, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, Caesar Chavez, Pope Benedict XVI, and the Dalai Lama. Their faithfulness to God and their ability to synergize God’s grace as Christian or world leaders has empowered them to live extraordinary lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Grace thereby has the potential to transform the human heart and human nature and move a person beyond sin, selfishness, and egocentricity toward a life of simplicity, service, and social justice. In the simplest sense, grace is cooperating with God’s cosmic and celestial design for humanity, and the motive is sheer love. Nevertheless, the relationship between grace, human freedom, and free will remains an open theological question, and one that involves one’s conscience.

Conscience

Conscience is linked to grace insofar that it propels us into thinking, reflecting, and making correct moral decisions. The term *conscience* comes from the Latin word *conscientia* and the Greek word *syneidesis*; both translate as *heart*. Conscience is a driving-force within the process of Christian morality and decision making. A morally upright Catholic must develop a conscience that is rooted in the New Testament and one that pierces the heart in order to make ethically appropriate choices.

Before examining conscience in more detail, let me begin by discussing *what conscience is not* and then describe the exact meaning of conscience. First, conscience is *not* a small mechanical voicebox



telling a person what is right and what is wrong. Second, conscience is *not* a little guardian angel whispering in a person's ear to direct her or his actions. Third, conscience is *not* a feeling, whether the feeling be guilt, worry, frustration, dissatisfaction, or restlessness.

What Is Conscience?

In the broadest understanding, conscience is self-awareness, which helps an individual act and become the kind of person he or she is capable of becoming. The Second Vatican Council states: "Deep within a person's conscience the person discovers a law which has not been self-imposed, but which the person must obey, the voice, ever calling the person to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil. A person's conscience is her/his most secret core and sanctuary. There, the person is alone with God whose voice echoes in the depths of a person."^{iv} From a religious context, conscience is a person's inner dialogue with God, who calls each one to act like a child of God. According to theologian Walter Conn, "Conscience is the actively involved personal agent struggling to reach a concrete understanding and practical judgments as to what course of *action* he or she should take to respond in a creative and fully human way to the values in this particular situation."^v For the Christian, conscience involves action, judgment, and responsibility; it is an internal moral strength. The Christian has a sense of responsibility and is accountable for his or her actions. First, before a person acts, a clear conscience indicates and directs what ought to be done. Second, a clear conscience enables a person to do something about this "ought" in question. Third, a clear conscience reflects on a personal judgment, whether it was a right or wrong decision. A healthy and clear conscience moves us toward a life of grace and allows Catholics to make good and moral decisions founded in God's love.

Contemporary understanding of conscience is more developed and further nuanced than the understanding during New Testament times. Borrowing from Catholic moral theologian Timothy O'Connell, there are three dimensions of conscience: (1) *synderesis*, the basic tendency within human beings to know and to do the good; (2) *moral science*, the process of discovering the particular good that ought to be done (or evil to be avoided); and (3) *conscience*, the specific judgment of the good which "I must do" in a particular situation.^{vi} O'Connell refers to each of these dimensions as conscience/1, conscience/2, and conscience/3.

Conscience/1 is referred to as an abiding human *characteristic*, "a general sense of value, an awareness of personal responsibility, that is, utterly emblematic of the human person."^{vii} **Conscience/2** is a *process* that that characteristic demands. Conscience "deals with the effort to achieve a specific perception of values, concrete individual values."^{viii} Therefore conscience is an ongoing process of reflection and introspection, as well as discussion and discernment about one's attitudes and actions. **Conscience/3** is an *event*—that is, it moves Christians from perception and reasoning to action. O'Connell believes that it is the "concrete judgment of a specific person pertaining to her/his own immediate action."^{ix} At this level of conscience, the outcome must be personal; for example, "I must do this because I believe it to be ethically and morally right." Thus it is the essence of dignity and freedom of Christian conscience.

The implications of Christian conscience and forming a moral conscience are significant within the Christian community, specifically with respect to free will. Free will is far reaching and is not limited to conscience; it also implies character.



Character

Character is the Christian's ubiquitous integrity that shapes the texture of personal character and involves in a general way the following of truth in search for justice (and vice versa). Christian character is synonymous with moral integrity, rightly understood as the individual's enduring personality, a way to evaluate the individual's pattern of strengths and weaknesses. Essentially character is equivalent to one's personality, and, as such, it emerges over the course of one's life and is intimately connected with dynamic developmental growth, self-awareness, and responsibility. This is the reason that Martin Luther King Jr. stated that Christians should judge a person "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." According to Catholic moral theologian John R. Popiden, "Character is not destiny, but the way of being which organizes and gives coherence to the various elements seemingly given by heredity and environment."^x Hence character shapes the Christian's life to make good and healthy decisions, to act justly, to live morally and in a consistent manner. Therefore, character helps to enhance a Catholic's ability to make a conscious and deliberate choice.

Choice

Another component of free will is making the right choices, but God does not force our hand in one direction or another; God gives us free will to make our choices. Human beings can simply choose to be morally upright and follow the Christian path toward righteousness, liberation, and transformation or gravitate toward confusion, chaos, and sin.

Choice is a powerful commodity. Choosing to do the good and to avoid bad decisions, or evil deeds, has always been a part of living an ethical life. Choice and free will are intimately connected. God does not sit in the heavens and "pull our strings" as if we are mere puppets for God's amusement. That would be a cruel joke. God gives each and every person the freedom of choice. This human faculty to choose a course of action is known as free will.

The major criterion of choice is personal authenticity and intent: good intent involves the self-transcending love; bad intent, coupled with poor choices, is typically not associated with fidelity and love of the human spirit.^{xi} Free will is required for living the Christian life with authenticity, responsibility, accountability, and morality. Since the third century, the Christian tradition has taught that God's grace does not take away a person's free will to choose. Although discussions about free will continue among philosophers and theologians, psychologists and sociologists have pointed out that a person's ability to determine a course of action is limited in ways that elude self-awareness. Nevertheless free will has traditionally been about human responsibility and good old-fashioned common sense.



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Endnotes

- ⁱ Quentin Quesnell, "Grace." In Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, editors, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 437.
- ⁱⁱ Mary C. Hilkert, "Grace." In Richard P. McBrien, general editor, *The Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 580.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Quesnell, p. 449.
- ^{iv} "Gaudium et Spes." In Austin Flannery, general editor, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, Study Edition*, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), article 16.
- ^v Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) p. 93.
- ^{vi} Timothy E. O'Connell, *Principles for Catholic Morality*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 105–113.
- ^{vii} O'Connell, p. 110.
- ^{viii} O'Connell, p. 111.
- ^{ix} O'Connell, p. 112.
- ^x John R. Popiden, "Moral Theology: Faith and a Christian Way of Life." In Thomas P. Rausch, editor, *Introduction to Theology*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 133.
- ^{xi} Conn, p. 24.

