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me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15). Jesus also left us the Church as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), and He told us that by listening to those who teach in His name, we listen to Him (cf. Lk 10:16). Along these lines, the Second Vatican Council tells us:

“In forming their consciences 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 (*Decree on Religious Liberty*, 14).”

The commandments of God and the teachings of the Church are not meant to be onerous punishments. They are given to us for our ultimate welfare and happiness. The God who speaks to us in the depths of our conscience is the same God who speaks to us through the Bible and the Church. We must make sure we are listening to God and not to ourselves.

3) Study the Sources of Moral Law.

If ignorance is one major source of an erroneous conscience, moral education is an absolute necessity. We grow in our knowledge of the moral law by a prayerful study of the Sacred Scriptures, the documents of the Church, and the lives of the saints. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a very valuable resource in this regard, especially Part Three, “Life in Christ.” We should also give careful attention to the teachings of the Pope and the bishops, especially with regard to current moral issues such as respect for

human life, the sacredness of marriage, and our obligations to the poor.

4) Seek the Advice of Good and Prudent People.

This is especially important when facing practical judgments of conscience. We must be careful to seek the advice of friends, clergy, or Religious who are faithful, prudent, and well informed. The Church invites us to take our concerns to the Lord in a special way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The Church knows that there are “situations that make moral judgments less assured and the decision difficult” (CCC, 1787). At times, more than one decision can be morally justified, but we “may never do evil so that good may result from it” (CCC, 1789). The Church teaches that certain acts are “intrinsically evil” and can never be justified, regardless of intentions or circumstances (cf. *The Splendor of Truth*, 80-81). A true conscience can never condone acts such as direct abortion, euthanasia, homicide, or immoral sex. We must avoid the advice of people who might justify such intrinsically evil actions.

5) Pray and Ask for the Grace of Ongoing Conversion.

Pope John Paul II exhorts us to form our consciences by “a continuous conversion to what is true and what is good” (*The Splendor of Truth*, 64). As St. Paul teaches, it is only by the renewal of our minds that we can “prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Moral and spiritual conversion must be rooted in prayer and the sacraments, especially the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. The more we pray with humility before God, the better we will be able to hear Him speak in the depths of our hearts.

Thus, a well-formed conscience is one truly sensitive to the voice of God and rooted in His Word. It formulates its judgments in accordance with reason, the divine law, and “the sacred and certain teachings of the Church” (*Decree on Religious Liberty*, 14). If we sincerely desire to live in a manner holy and pleasing to God, we must ask for the help of the Holy Spirit, who will remain in us and lead us to all truth (cf. Jn 14:16-17). A conscience formed by the Spirit of Truth will be upright and reliable.

For More Information:

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second edition, Nos. 1776-1802.

Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), Nos. 13-17.

Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration on Religious Liberty), Nos. 1-3 and 14.

John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), Nos. 54-64.

William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, Second Edition (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2003), pp. 57-65; 170-183; 245-286.

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By Robert Fastiggi, Ph.D.

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How to Form Your Catholic Conscience

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In order to have a “good conscience,” a person must seek the truth and must make judgments in accordance with that same truth.

— Pope John Paul II

Why is a conscience important?

In life, we face many situations that require judgments of conscience. Should we attend the wedding of a relative who is getting married outside the Church? Can we discontinue medical treatment for a dying mother or father? Are we obligated to report a fellow worker who is stealing money from the company?

Faced with such questions, we are often advised to follow our conscience. But what is conscience, and how can we be sure that it is guiding us to do what is right?

Many people think of conscience as simply their values or opinions about what is right or wrong, something subjective and personal that no one else can correct.

Catholics, however, know that conscience is much more than opinion. Indeed, it is associated with the most important decisions we can make regarding sin and right action. It is so important that the Church instructs us to make an “examination of conscience” before we go to Confession. Such an examination requires us to be honest with ourselves before God. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church instructs us to make an examination of conscience “in the light of the Word of God,” especially the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount (cf. CCC, 1454).

When we look into our conscience before confessing our sins to the priest, we are passing judgment on acts or omissions that have already taken place. Conscience, though, also involves judgments about what to do (or not to do) ahead of time. When we turn

to our conscience, we are drawing upon an interior resource that enables us to hear God’s voice and apply His law to a given situation. A well-formed conscience will guide us “to do good and avoid evil” at the appropriate moment (CCC, 1777).



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“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Jn 14:15

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Is our conscience always right?

The Catholic Church teaches that we are bound to follow our conscience faithfully in order to come to God who is our “last end” (*Decree on Religious Liberty*, 3). In the final analysis, God will judge us according to our conscience (cf. *Church in the Modern World*, 16). Conscience, though, is not infallible. It can make “erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed” (CCC, 1790). Simply put, because we are imperfect, our consciences can be imperfect.

The main sources for these erroneous judgments are:

- ◆ Ignorance
- ◆ Sin
- ◆ Bad example
- ◆ Lack of conversion
- ◆ Enslavement to passions
- ◆ A sense of moral autonomy
- ◆ A “rejection of the Church’s authority and her teaching” (CCC, 1792).

Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” reflects the distressing perplexity of a man who often no longer knows who he is, whence he comes and where he is going. Hence we not infrequently witness the fearful plunging of the human person into situations of gradual self-destruction.

—Pope John Paul II

What if a person doesn’t know any better?

Even when conscience makes mistakes because of ignorance, it still retains its dignity. God might excuse certain people for mistakes of conscience if their ignorance is so deeply rooted that it cannot be overcome by their own efforts (cf. *The Splendor of Truth*, 62). However, God — who knows all things — will be severe toward those who fall into error because of willful neglect of the truth or laziness, and allow their consciences to become gradually blind “as a result of habitual sin” (*Church in the Modern World*, 16). In short, God will judge us according to our conscience, but He will also determine whether we have taken the steps to form our consciences properly.

So how do we form our conscience properly?

The Church teaches that the education of a well-formed conscience is a “lifelong task” (CCC, 1783-1784). Here are some basic suggestions for the steps we should take to acquire an upright and truthful conscience:

1) Resolve to Do What is Right.

This sounds very simple, but it’s not. Because of our fallen nature and the effects of original sin, we are often dominated by self-interest. We must make up our minds that we wish to do what is right and pleasing to God — not what is most satisfying to ourselves. It is

only when we wish to do what is right, that we can truly learn what is right.

2) Trust in God, His Law, and His Church.

In difficult matters of conscience, we may be tempted to claim that we can decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, and that we know better than the Bible or the Church. This, though, is arrogance, not wisdom. Obeying God’s commandments is the way of life that Jesus taught us: “If you love

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