

The Formation of Conscience

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All God's people from the beginning of time have had the responsibility of forming their conscience and acting upon it. This is a God given right and responsibility –not a church granted one. It stems from the very definition of what it means to be human...to be free...to be responsible ...to be self determining...to be accountable for one's actions...

Echoes of this truth can be found in the Adam and Eve story, the Cain and Abel account and the whole religious tradition of the chosen people. The New Testament likewise encourages Christians to seek the kingdom of God within you. Christ further promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide us in the way of all truth.

Vatican II in its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World likewise emphasizes this truth: "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, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. 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. His conscience is man's most secret core and 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. Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other people in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships." (*par 16*)

As members of the church Catholics do look to Church authority for guidance in their decision-making, particularly in matters of faith. But Church teaching can never be a replacement for conscience because a genuine decision of conscience must come from within and not be imposed from the outside. The responsibility of the Catholic towards Church teaching might be summarized as follows:

The first responsibility is to know what the Church is teaching accurately and precisely.

In matters of faith that the church has solemnly proclaimed infallible the individual Catholic must accept that teaching or no longer be considered Catholic.

On all other issues the Church speaks non-infallibly. The responsible Catholic needs to give these teachings careful consideration and accord them the presumption of truth. If careful and prayerful study leaves one unconvinced about these teachings and positive reasons suggest another view, the individual Catholic has the right and responsibility to follow his conscience rather than church teaching.

Vatican II made it abundantly clear that Catholics have an obligation " to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city. For guidance and spiritual strength let them turn to the clergy; but let them realize that their pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer for every problem (even every grave problem that arises; this is not the role of the clergy....

Very often their Christian vision will suggest a certain solution in some given situation. Yet it happens rather frequently. And legitimately so, that some of the faithful, with no less sincerity will see the problem quite differently....let them , then, try to guide each other by sincere dialog in a spirit of mutual charity and with anxious interest above all for the common good." (*par.43*)

Even Cardinal Ratzinger acknowledges that a Catholic may not vote for a candidate promoting abortion precisely because of the candidate's permissive stand on abortion but if one votes for the candidate for other reasons it can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons. What should be assessed is not just the

importance of the issue itself, but also the effectiveness of one's vote. What are those proportionate reasons in this election?

If one's vote would certainly bring about an end to all abortions, one might argue that the conscientious Catholic should cast that vote. But it is highly unlikely that a vote for the Republican platform will lead to significant changes. President Bush surely did sign the Partial-Birth Abortion Act but already it has been declared unconstitutional in three states. Even though Republican Presidents have nominated six of the seven Supreme Court Justices, four of the six voted in 1992 to uphold the Roe decision. This fact alone renders one's vote on this matter relatively ineffective.

In light of this, the far more significant question is: Which party agenda will best realize the concerns that cover the whole spectrum of right to life issues... concerning war, violence, poverty, unemployment, health care, jobs, human rights, peace, etc. The American Bishops' test is that the measure of any economy is how it treats the poorest of the poor. These issues consequently become much more significant in one's moral decision making because there is a real possibility that something good can be accomplished. It provides proportionate reason for Catholics to weigh all the life issues of each candidate, rather than making one's vote dependent on a single issue.