

“Conscience is the most sacred of all property; other property depending in part on positive law, the exercise of that, being a natural and unalienable right.”

James Madison. Property, 1792



What is Conscience?

In Robert Bolt's famous play (and later, film), *A Man for All Seasons*, the great 16th century English chancellor and martyr St. Thomas More declares, "When a man takes an oath, he's holding his own self in his own hands like water, and if he opens his fingers then, he needn't hope to find himself again."

"[H]e's holding his own self in his own hands..." The Church teaches that "Man has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 16). Furthermore, the *Catechism* states that "[c]onscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1796). Thus conscience is that "place within" whereby the human person hears God's voice—usually whispering, sometimes shouting, always beckoning: "Do good; avoid evil." Conscience is "the most sacred of all property" because it is the human person's "own self in his own hands;" indeed, it is the *free decision* to heed or reject the voice of God in one's conscience that defines whether a person is good or evil—or, as St. Thomas More implies, lost or found.

Forming conscience is a life-long process

What, then, are our responsibilities to conscience (or rather, to God through conscience)? We have a responsibility to *form our conscience* as best we can. For Catholic Christians, this is normally done through *undergoing catechesis*—that is, by learning what Christ teaches through the preaching, writing and teaching of the Pope and bishops, the Sacred Scriptures, and the Church's general "reading" of the natural moral law. It must be noted, however,

We are obligated to *obey our conscience*. This, of course, presumes that it has been well-formed. To be more specific, forming conscience is the duty to develop an objectively "correct" conscience, to be followed by the obligation to adhere to a subjectively "certain" conscience. In other words, when we have a "correct" conscience, our conscience is *actually* in conformity with the truth of the faith. A "certain" conscience, on the other hand, is when, having sought the truth as best we can, we *believe* our conscience is in conformity with the truth of the faith.

that this obligation to form our conscience is never-ending; since, as stated above, "conscience is a judgment of reason," and reason can sometimes err, we therefore have a duty always to learn more. Thus it is good to join a parish Bible Study and/or participate in an adult religious education class, to read the writings of saints and other (especially contemporary) spiritual masters, to consult someone trained in the art of moral and spiritual direction (usually, a priest-confessor, but also a deacon, religious, or lay person tested in divine wisdom and holiness). One source of ongoing education is our archdiocesan newspaper, the *Catholic Standard*, and other sources can be found through regular visits to archdiocesan social media platforms.



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Helpful Rules for Forming Conscience

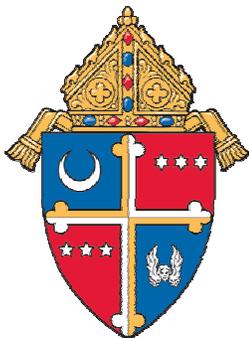
"First, always follow a certain conscience. Second, an incorrect conscience must be changed if possible. Third, do not act with a doubtful conscience. We must always obey the certain judgments of our conscience, realizing that our conscience can be incorrect, that it can make a mistake about what is truly the good or the right thing to do. This can be due to ignorance in which, through no fault of our own, we did not have all we needed to make a correct judgment" (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, p. 315).

Indeed, in *A Man for All Seasons*, St. Thomas More presumes such ignorance on the part of the Duke of Norfolk, who tries to persuade St. Thomas to join him "for fellowship" in taking an oath declaring King Henry VIII supreme head of the Church in England: "And when we die, and you are sent to heaven for doing your conscience, and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?"

Finally, along with our responsibility to form and obey our conscience, we have a duty to exercise our conscience and make it grow. There is a private (or personal) and a public (or social) dimension to this. Privately, we strengthen our conscience through spiritual exercises such as prayer and regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). Moreover, every time we obey a certain conscience, we strengthen that conscience and predispose it also to be a correct conscience, whereas every time we disobey a certain conscience (and every time we act with a doubtful conscience) we weaken that conscience and predispose it also to be an incorrect conscience.

Drawing Others to Truth

Publicly, we strengthen our conscience when we act—either individually or with others—in accordance with a well-formed conscience and when the witness of our lives draws others to the truth. A well-formed conscience and action on behalf of truth is a personal commitment with a public expression in our lives, families, churches (synagogues and mosques), schools, hospitals, neighborhoods, places of employment, and through our regional and national policies and laws. Indeed, this is another reason why conscience is "the most sacred of all property": *for when the conscience of a nation is strong, the nation itself is strong and remains a force for good—both for its own citizens and for the entire world.*



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Did you know?

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*...

Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.

In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path, we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church (1783, 1785).

From the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*...

The truth concerning good and evil is recognized in a practical and concrete manner by the judgment of conscience, which leads to the acceptance of responsibility for the good accomplished and the evil committed. "Consequently in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, the link between freedom and truth is made manifest. Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of 'judgment' which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary 'decisions'. The maturity and responsibility of these judgments—and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject—are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favor of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions" (139).