

Conscience

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To be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, is a call to grow and to embrace the daily challenge to change one's heart. Recognizing that God first loved us and sustains us, Christian morality is not a commitment to abstract principles, but to a personal loving God. The ultimate norm of Christian conduct is Gospel love: what does love of God demand of me in these circumstances? How a person perceives her relationship to God and God's judgment is the starting point for understanding the meaning of conscience and how it functions.

A definition of conscience

As Americans look forward to their national elections, it is timely to review an understanding of how personal conscience functions. Vatican II provides us, perhaps, with the most definitive explanation of conscience in [*Gaudium et Spes*](#), paragraph 16:

In the depths of our conscience, we detect a law which does not impose, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to our hearts more specifically: do this; shun that. For we have in our heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of being human; according to it we will be judged (2 Cor 6:10). Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There we are alone with God, Whose voice echoes in our depths (John 1:3, 14). In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor (Eph. 1:10). In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of humanity in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships.

The document, *Gaudium and Spes*, states clearly that that each person is graciously endowed with a conscience. It is integral to human nature; it resides within the inner most depths of our spirit and it must function free of any outside pressures. Conscience possesses an almost intuitive sense of the fundamental moral principle to do good and avoid evil. Basically conscience is a guide for behavior.

How conscience functions

Ironically conscience is called upon in times of conflict when there are not clear or direct answers to an issue. Sometimes important issues are in conflict or competing with one another. In this election cycle, immigration, abortion, racism and gun control each make a rightful moral claim upon us. Conscience then, seeks out the truth factually in a thoughtful and objective process. When appropriate, a perceived good is selected. The choice is both subjective and affective, producing a sense of peace in having made the best possible choice.

The search for truth

The search for truth is a complex process, especially given the cultural, political, social and economic dimensions of our current American society. Finding accurate information is a first step. Uncovering real facts is difficult simply because there is so much disinformation and untruth on line and in social media. Too, so many issues are contentious that half-truths are often offered as solutions.

Applying time tested principles to an issue is a traditional method for arriving at the moral assessment of a social dilemma. Human dignity, the common good and justice are moral principles that are an integral part of the Catholic social tradition. Do the political platforms of each party respect, protect, promote and defend human life seamlessly across each issue? Or do some proposals respect the dignity of human life selectively in some issues, and denigrate life in other issues? Do some social proposals promote the common good, helping a broad swath of the population? Or will some proposals create chaos and economic uncertainty precipitating new levels of poverty? In such instances it is appropriate to ask: who gains; who loses?

Conclusion

Making a decision in conscience is not simply a matter of a cost benefit analysis. The Christian's stance toward God is that sense of 'metanoia', continuously opening one's heart to God. Conversion, as that ever-deepening process of seeking God, is made possible because of Jesus' redeeming mission initiating the reign of God. Our positive actions acknowledge, participate and extend the reign of God, God's love and justice. In the light of God's reign of love and justice, the ultimate norm for Christian behavior is to ask anew a fundamental question: What does the love of God – who has so freely graced me – ask of me in this set of circumstances?