

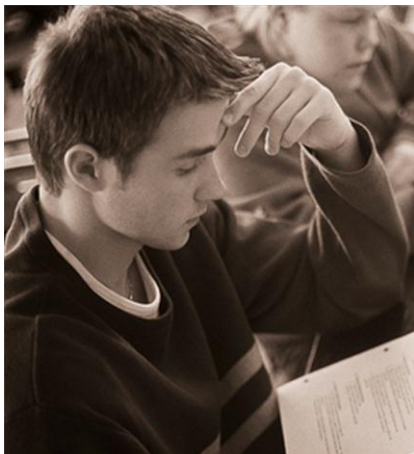


What is Conscience?

In ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*** (no. 17), the Catholic Bishops of the United States Conscience remind us:

“The Church equips its members to address political and social questions by helping them to develop a well-formed conscience. ...Conscience is not something that allows us to justify doing whatever we want, nor is it a mere “feeling” about what we should or should not do. Rather, conscience is the voice of God resounding in the human heart, revealing the truth to us and calling us to do what is good while shunning what is evil.”

Conscience is a judgment of practical reason that helps us to recognize and seek what is good, and to reject what is evil (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778, 1796).



The Second Vatican Council wrote:

“Always summoning [one] to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to [one’s] heart more specifically: do this, shun that” (*Gaudium et Spes* 16).

Conscience does not simply “come to us”! Throughout our lives, we have to spend time *forming our consciences* so that we can make well-reasoned judgments about particular situations.

How Do I Form My Conscience?

As the bishops note in ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship***, we need to form our consciences in an *ongoing manner*. How do we do this?

- 1) When examining any issue or situation, we must begin by **being open to the truth** and what is right.
- 2) We must **study Sacred Scripture** and the **teaching** of the Church.
- 3) We must **examine the facts** and **background information** about various choices.
- 4) We must **prayerfully reflect** to discern the will of God (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, no. 18).

The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* adds:

- 5) The **prudent advice** and **good example** of others support and enlighten our conscience.
- 6) The **authoritative teaching** of the Church is an essential element.
- 7) The **gifts of the Holy Spirit** help us develop our conscience.
- 8) Regular **examination of conscience** is important as well (p. 314).



Reflections on Conscience

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1777 Moral conscience,¹ present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment **to do good and to avoid evil**. It also **judges particular choices**, approving those that are good and denouncing those that are evil.² It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.

1778 Conscience is a **judgment of reason** whereby the human person recognizes the **moral quality of a concrete act** that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.

¹Cf. *Rom* 2:14-16. ²Cf. *Rom* 1:32.

Reflections on Conscience Formation

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1784 The education of the conscience is a **lifelong task**. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. **Prudent education** teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults.



The education of the conscience **guarantees freedom** and **engenders peace** of heart.

1785 In the formation of conscience the **Word of God** is the light for our path,³ 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**.⁴

³Cf. *Ps* 119:105. ⁴ Cf. *Dignitatis Humanae* 14.

Reflection Questions

1. What is conscience?
2. When has my conscience guided me to “do good and avoid evil”?
3. What are some key resources I can use to form my conscience?
4. Forming conscience is a “lifelong task.” What do I do to *regularly* form my conscience? What more should I do?



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