

Examining the Role of Conscience in Making Moral Decisions

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Q: I disagree with some of the teachings of the Catholic Church. I was once told that I don't have to follow all of the church's teachings if they violate my conscience. But still, I'm not sure that's right.

A: First, I want to commend you for asking this question. The fact that you were moved to ask demonstrates two things: that God's grace can be operative in every person who is open to him, and secondly that you are sincere in your desire to do God's will.

I have run into a number of people in a similar predicament as you. They asked someone who ought to be able to give some guidance on what was a difficult moral question. In response, they seemed to get an answer that indicated that, in the end, they had to just "follow their conscience."

I can understand this. In the course of my life as a priest, I have (like all of my brother priests) been asked to weigh in on life situations in which there were no easy or obvious answers. At times, after going through all of the tools and resources the church offers for right decision-making, the right way to go remained foggy and difficult.

“When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking” —CCC 1777

In addition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking” (CCC 1777). Because of this line and others that highlight the importance of conscience, it is tempting to take the default position of “whatever you feel is right, just do that.”

I am not denying this. After all, this is clearly part of the catechism. (I’m not about to go toe-to-toe with the catechism and think that I can win! I’m not that smart.) But it misses crucial pieces of information.

First, while it is essential that we are sincere in the decisions we make, we don’t only have an obligation to ourselves. This is something that we have lost in our culture.

We think that “to thine own self be true” is the highest commandment. It isn’t. While it is good to be truthful and interiorly at peace, we also must be true to others. It’s even more essential that we are true to God. We may have an obligation to strive for authenticity, but we also have an obligation to obey God. I am not the only one to whom I must be true.

Second, the church’s teaching on conscience presumes knowledge of the moral law. This means that those who are exercising conscience know that there is a real right and a real wrong. Unfortunately, there are fewer people who acknowledge this reality. This places us in a unique place in human history.

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A recent study reported that only 8 percent of American teenagers believe in a real right and a real wrong. This ignorance is unprecedented. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith recently concluded a nationwide study on the moral life of 18- to 29-year-olds. His conclusion was that this age group, generally speaking, has neither the vocabulary nor the categories to make moral decisions. If conscience depends on principles of right and wrong, how will these young people make decisions? According to Smith, they base their decisions on feelings.

But conscience is not a feeling. The catechism clearly states that conscience “formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator” (CCC 1783). This means employing one’s mind more than one’s emotions to make

decisions. Conscience is not merely some feeling we get; it is the critical application of truth to the present issue.

Third, it is true that, a person “must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters” (CCC 1782). But this does not mean doing whatever pleases me.

Let’s take a potentially explosive issue. When Pope Paul VI reinforced the church’s constant teaching against artificial birth control in the document “*Humanae Vitae*,” many couples were encouraged to dismiss this teaching if it “violated their conscience.” Unfortunately, as a result, many couples were obliquely encouraged to invite a sinful practice into their sexual relationship. Even more, they were led to believe that they could dismiss virtually any official and binding church teaching if they disliked it.

Because that is all this comes down to. The church’s teaching on contraception does not “violate” a person’s conscience. Unless a person truly believed that periodic abstinence in marriage was an evil (which is all that is being asked for through natural family planning), then there is no conscience issue here. It is an issue of a) not knowing or understanding the church’s teaching (which could be remedied by asking someone who knows), b) lacking the will to choose the good (which is always an issue for every person striving to live virtuously, but not a good reason to choose sin over virtue), or c) a matter of personal dislike for a particular teaching or the church in general.

Seek to do his will above absolutely all else. Even in very difficult circumstances, God can be trusted.

After all of this, if we still have reasonable doubt regarding what to do, we ought to do the following. First, pray. Second, it is wise to examine your conscience regularly. Third, choose to do good. Fourth, seek wise and holy counsel from someone who is not only educated in the area of morality but who personally defers to the wisdom of Christ and his church in all things. Lastly, trust God. He comes to our aid in times of weakness and confusion. Seek to do his will above absolutely all else. Even in very difficult circumstances, God can be trusted.