

CONSCIENCE FORMATION

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Recently a study was published entitled “What Catholic Women Think about Faith, Conscience, and Contraception.”¹ 824 women gave answers that “offer new data about the views of Church-going Catholic women towards contraception and related Church teachings... The data confirms that most Catholic women do not fully support the Church’s teachings on contraception and natural family planning.”² No surprise there. Statistics improved with the level of attendance at Mass and Sacraments, with those who agree with Church teaching being those women who attend daily Mass. Again, no surprise there. What was interesting was one of the conclusions of the authors’ study: “The data underscores the formidable challenge the Church faces in the area of conscience formation, particularly about sexual matters.”³

My talk is not about contraception as such, but I want to use this study to illustrate my main thesis: how does one form a conscience, and what constitutes a fully informed *Catholic* conscience? According to the study, almost one-third of Church-going Catholic women...incorrectly believe that the Church teaches that couples have the right to decide the moral acceptability of contraception *regardless* of Church teaching.⁴ “Confusion over the morality of contraception reflects women’s deeper confusion about how – or even whether – Church teaching ought to shape individual conscience in matters of sexual morality. While 63% of Church-going Catholic women say the Church’s teachings on sex and reproduction ‘influence’ them, only 21% of this ‘influenced’ group fully accept the Church’s teaching on contraception. Moreover, 85% of Church-going Catholic women believe that they can be ‘good Catholics’ even if they do not accept some of the Church’s teachings on sex and reproduction. [They] give many reasons why they reject Church teaching on contraception. Their top reasons highlight issues of conscience formation: 53% of these women say that couples have the ‘moral right’ to decide which methods of family planning to use – a position that disregards the Church’s judgment on whether particular methods are morally licit in the first place.”⁵ “Church-going Catholic women want to do what’s right. The women surveyed reflect a sincere commitment to faith in their daily lives. But they belong to a generation steeped in moral relativism – a generation...which generally equates

¹ Mary Rice & Michelle Hill, The Women, Faith and Culture Project, a nationwide online survey of Church-going Catholic women (18-54), survey held June21-July1, 2011. Preliminary Report August 2012.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3

‘conscience’ with their own ‘moral permission slip,’ and which judges right and wrong by depth of feeling rather than consonance with objective truth.”⁶

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the issue: whether we’re talking about a specific moral teaching like contraception, or speaking generally about Catholic lifestyle, culture, or decision making in other areas like voting, the formation of a specifically Catholic conscience is a huge problem in our time. The study identifies some of the causes of a poorly-formed Catholic conscience: “Catholic clergy and lay leaders have ceded the conscience formation of Catholic women to dissenting theologians, contraceptive-promoting medical professionals, and the sexualized popular culture.”⁷ By remaining silent we’ve given people the mistaken idea that people can decide for themselves what to do in a variety of areas of personal and public life as a Catholic.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines conscience in this way: “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act...In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right.”⁸ “Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality; their application in the given circumstances...; and judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed.”⁹ “Conscience enables one to assume responsibility for the acts performed. If man commits evil... [conscience] calls to mind the forgiveness that must be asked, the good that must still be practiced, and the virtue that must be constantly cultivated with the grace of God.”¹⁰ (This is a reference to “good guilt,” how when our consciences bother us when we do wrong it calls us to conversion—not all guilt is bad: if we do something wrong we ought to feel guilty!) “Moral conscience, 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...in reference to the supreme Good...When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.”¹¹

Next the *Catechism* describes the formation of conscience. “Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. 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 teaching.”¹² “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

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 1778.

⁹ CCC 1780

¹⁰ CCC 1781

¹¹ CCC 1777

¹² CCC 1783

the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.”¹³

So, we’re supposed to have well-formed and informed consciences. We are supposed to apply authoritative teaching, not just our own opinions or feelings, to any given decision or choice. “Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them.”¹⁴ We are supposed to measure the content of our conscience against reason and God’s law, the Commandments and teachings of the Church. The problem is, people have been taught to believe there are no moral absolutes—no issues that are always right or always wrong no matter the culture, civilization, or era of the human race. If morality is subjective, then the only standard by which to judge right from wrong is my own opinions, or the voices of those around me whose opinions I like and will reinforce my own choices. This is what then-Cardinal Ratzinger referred to as the “dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”¹⁵

What does the Catechism say about a poorly-formed and uninformed conscience? “It can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and make erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.”¹⁶ “This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man ‘takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.’ In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.”¹⁷ This is called “vincible ignorance” – what one should know but doesn’t and refuses to learn. There is also what is called “invincible ignorance,” where “the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment [and] the evil cannot be imputed to him.”¹⁸ This kind of ignorance is when one has no way of knowing there was a moral action to be taken, when “you don’t know what you don’t know.” Errors of judgment can be caused by “ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example, enslavement to one’s passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church’s authority and her teaching, and a lack of conversion and charity.”¹⁹

“Assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience”: what does this mean? This goes back to the report I described earlier, where conscience is

¹³ CCC 1785

¹⁴ CCC 1786

¹⁵ Homily of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals, Mass for the Election of the Supreme Pontiff, St. Peter's Basilica, 18 April 2005

¹⁶ CCC 1790

¹⁷ CCC 1791

¹⁸ CCC 1793

¹⁹ CCC 1792

understood to be a kind of “moral permission slip,” which judges right and wrong by depth of feeling rather than consonance with objective truth. Twice the Catechism states the freedom of conscience: “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself.”²⁰ “Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. ‘He 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.’”²¹ This can sound like a “moral permission slip”: like the Church is placing freedom of conscience above all else, including right reason, legitimate authority, Church teaching, or the Word of God! But an uninformed conscience is a useless conscience, a conscience that references only one’s feelings and opinions or the current trends of culture is a conscience bereft of objective truth, a conscience that is subject to the dictatorship of relativism, a conscience that cannot be trusted. The primacy of conscience is enshrined in the *Catechism*, as I just noted. But this teaching is often misunderstood to mean little more than a license to do anything. “It doesn’t make sense...to think the Church is going to instruct its members that following the dictates of their conscience, in opposition to Church teaching, is acceptable.”²² It is contradictory to say “By disobeying Church teaching on [whatever], I am actually obeying the Church’s teaching to follow my conscience.”

So now we come to “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,”²³ the title of the US Bishops’ document on how to vote. The bishops “do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. [Their] purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God’s truth.”²⁴ The bishops refer to that mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience when they teach “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 always requires serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truth of our faith.”²⁵ “The formation of conscience...begins with a willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is also important to examine the facts and background information about various choices. Finally, prayerful reflection is essential to discern the will of God.”²⁶

²⁰ CCC 1790

²¹ CCC 1782, quoting *Dignitatis Humanae*, On the Dignity of the Human Person, a document of the Second Vatican Council.

²² Fr. Christopher Smith OP, “Primacy of Conscience Misinterpreted,” October 12, 2012.

²³ (FC), USCCB, November 14, 2007.

²⁴ FC 7.

²⁵ FC 17.

²⁶ FC 19.

The bishops then begin the instruction on the boundaries of moral decisions. First, “there are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called ‘intrinsically evil’ actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned.”²⁷ First on their list of intrinsic evil is abortion and euthanasia: “In our nation, ‘abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others.’”²⁸ It is a mistake with grave consequences to treat the destruction of innocent human life merely as a matter of individual choice. A legal system that violates the basic right to life on the grounds of choice is fundamentally flawed.”²⁹ Also listed as intrinsically evil are human cloning, and destructive research on human embryos.³⁰ In a new Introductory Note to “Faithful Citizenship” in 2012 the bishops added as intrinsically evil the “Intensifying efforts to redefine marriage and enact measures which undermine marriage as the permanent, faithful, and fruitful union of one man and one woman.”³¹ The bishops then quote Pope John Paul II on “the importance of being true to fundamental Church teachings: ‘Above all, *the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights* – for example the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture – *is false and illusory if the right to life*, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, *is not defended* with maximum determination.’”³² Our new bishop, Kevin Vann, wrote this in a letter to his flock in Fort Worth in 2008: “We cannot make more clear the seriousness of the overriding issue of abortion – while not the ‘only issue’ – it is the defining moral issue, not only today, but of the last [now 39] years. Since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, more than [now 55.5 million] innocent lives have been lost.”³³

Here’s where things start getting sticky in “Faithful Citizenship.” “Two temptations in public life can distort the Church’s defense of human life and dignity. The first is a moral equivalence that makes no ethical distinctions between different kinds of issues involving human life and dignity. The direct and intentional destruction of human life from the moment of conception until natural death is always wrong and is not just one issue among many. It must always be opposed.”³⁴ “The second [temptation] is the misuse of these

²⁷ FC 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, quoting another USCCB document, *Living the Gospel of Life*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ FC 23.

³¹ FC “Introductory Note,” 2012.

³² FC 26, quoting Pope John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici* 38.

³³ Joint Statement, Bishop Kevin Farrell (Dallas) and Kevin Vann (Fort Worth), October 8, 2008.

³⁴ FC 27-28.

necessary moral distinctions as a way of dismissing or ignoring other serious threats to human life and dignity. Racism and other unjust discrimination, the death penalty, unjust war, torture, war crimes, the failure to respond to those who are suffering from hunger or lack of health care, or an unjust immigration policy are all serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act. These are not optional concerns which can be dismissed... Although choices about how best to respond to these and other compelling threats to human life and dignity are matters for principled debate and decision, this does not make them optional concerns or permit Catholics to dismiss or ignore Church teaching on these important issues.”³⁵

Okay, so there is a hierarchy of doctrine: some issues are more important than others because some involve intrinsically evil acts that no Catholic can support, and there are other issues that are a matter of debate on the best way to solve them. At the same time, however, we can't just ignore the debatable issues in order to focus only on intrinsic evil. There is a hierarchy of truths in Catholic teaching, since they vary in their relation to the fundamentals of Christian faith. On issues of intrinsic evil, there is one and only one legitimate Catholic opinion; on other issues (like the death penalty or the justness of a specific war) we're relatively free to disagree with one another. Abortion is a greater evil than a broken immigration policy; but that doesn't mean we ignore immigration issues and only strive to overturn abortion, the scourge of our land, a crime that calls out to God for vengeance. We must not be single-issue voters: “A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support. Yet a candidate's position on a single issue that involves intrinsic evil...may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate.”³⁶ Our new Bishop Vann wrote: “As Catholics, we are faced with a number of issues that are of concern and should be addressed, such as immigration reform, health care, the economy, the poor, and terrorism... There are many possible solutions to these issues and there can be reasonable debate among Catholics on how to best approach and solve them. These are matters of ‘prudential judgment.’ But let us be clear: issues of prudential judgment are not morally equivalent to issues involving intrinsic evils. No matter how right a given candidate is on any of these issues, it does not outweigh a candidate's unacceptable position in favor of an intrinsic evil such as abortion or the protection of ‘abortion rights.’”³⁷ In an earlier US bishops' statement, “Living the Gospel of Life,” they wrote: “Being ‘right’ in such matters [of justice] can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life. Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters.”³⁸

³⁵ *FC* 29.

³⁶ *FC* 42.

³⁷ Farrell & Vann.

³⁸ “Living the Gospel of Life,” USCCB, 1998, 23.

The bishops write: “The exercise of conscience begins with outright opposition to laws and other policies that violate human life or weaken its protection. Those who knowingly, willingly, and directly support public policies or legislation that undermine fundamental moral principles cooperate with evil.”³⁹ Let me restate this: the Church insists that its members do not support laws in favor of things we are adamantly against. And the priority has already been defined: abortion and euthanasia first, traditional marriage, and any other intrinsic evil, then important moral issues that have debatable solutions. To vote for something intrinsically evil puts your immortal soul in jeopardy: to cooperate with evil makes you guilty of helping that evil to continue.

When making choices of candidates for public office we look at the morality of the issues behind the person and the party they represent. This is where a fully informed conscience is important. Not knowing who is running for office, or making a choice based on skin color, age, gender, or even religion is shallow and uninformed. What does that person stand for? What is that person going to do in the office he or she wants to run? Can I say that person represents me and my moral stance, and the stance of my Church? Why would I want someone in office who in fact does not represent me or at least will respect and tolerate my beliefs?

So now what about politicians who want your vote? What principles are supposed to guide us? “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, if the voter’s intent is to support that position. In such cases a Catholic would be guilty of cooperation in grave evil.”⁴⁰ In other words, if you want to vote for someone because that person is in favor of something the Church is against, you put your immortal soul in jeopardy: again, to vote for someone who is going to promote things Catholics are against is cooperating and allowing the evil to continue.

To muddy the waters more, here’s another principle: “There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons. Voting in this way would be permissible only for truly grave moral reasons, not to advance some narrow interests or partisan preferences or to ignore a fundamental moral evil.”⁴¹ So, candidate A is, among a host of issues, pro-life; candidate B is, among a host of issues, in favor of abortion rights. All things being equal, you vote for candidate A. BUT, for a “truly grave moral reason” you might vote for candidate B without committing mortal sin. The problem is, the bishops do not explain what conditions may constitute “grave moral reasons,” but a couple of answers have been given by individual bishops. “Could a Catholic in good

³⁹ FC 31.

⁴⁰ FC 34.

⁴¹ FC 35.

conscience vote for a candidate who supports legalized abortion..? Could a voter's preference for the candidate's positions on peace, the poor, universal health care, immigration policy, etc. overcome a candidate's support for legalized abortion? In such a case, the Catholic voter must ask and answer the question: What could possibly be a proportionate reason for the [55.5 million] children killed by abortion in the past [39] years?"⁴² Archbishop Chaput answered this question with these haunting words: "Catholics who support 'pro-choice' candidates...need a compelling proportionate reason to justify it. What is a 'proportionate' reason when it comes to the abortion issue? It's the kind of reason we will be able to explain, with a clean heart, to the victims of abortion when we meet them face to face in the next life—which we most certainly will. If we're confident that these victims will accept our motives as something more than an alibi, then we can proceed."⁴³ It would seem that there are really no "grave moral reasons" or "proportionate reasons" to allow a Catholic to vote for someone who favors intrinsically evil acts. But why then put such a statement in this document?

Here's what I think happens when people hear all this. Well, besides just being confused... We set up all the parameters of the issue of Catholic conscience formation and the responsibility of voting: 1) against intrinsic evil; 2) issues of prudential judgment; 3) insist on the hierarchy of values; 4) cannot be single issue voters. As these get discussed people begin to get angry when they realize the teachings of the Church seem to be "steering them" to one candidate or another, even though we never mentioned political parties or their platforms, and never mentioned any names. These principles for voting have been part of the Church's teaching for decades: they were not written simply to force Catholics, under pain of mortal sin, to vote for specific people and somehow we just manipulated Church teachings to fit a predetermined political outcome. People get angry when Catholic principles make it clear which candidates are acceptable—but that's EXCATLY what Catholic teaching is supposed to do! Clarify the moral path of making choices so it's clear which one will serve the common good and respect Catholic beliefs. If all the candidates were so close to each other morally, the principles of the Church would make it more difficult to discern one from another. But when the candidates and the parties vary as widely as they often do in elections, the Church's teachings set the distinctions of individuals and policies in stark contrast. Some Catholics will cherry pick statements from "Faithful Citizenship" in order to rationalize a vote for someone or for a law that is patently inimical to Church teaching. "See? It says right here in number 45 that I can vote for someone who believes in abortion rights because he's also promised to fix immigration, or will give more money to social programs."

⁴² Pastoral letter of Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City and Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph (Missouri).

⁴³ Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, Archdiocese web column, "Thoughts on 'Roman Catholics for Obama,'" May 19, 2008.

“Faithful Citizenship,” as I have illustrated, tries so hard to give all sides to a moral issue that it leaves many Catholics confused, and gives others a rationale to do whatever they were already planning to do. Conscience formation, it should be clear, is a matter of knowing Church teaching and being converted by it, as well as applying it to concrete situations and actions. Americans don’t like being told what to do, but conversion never happens without confrontation, without the tweaking of the conscience that these principles are supposed to do. If ultimately our conscience is only the exercise of ego and selfish desires, we are not being converted by the truth. If we believe that we can contradict the moral teachings of the Church because of some false primacy of conscience, then we will always be able to rationalize a vote for a candidate who holds values exactly opposite of the Church. Is this the same as telling people for whom to vote? Absolutely not! It is teaching people HOW to vote, what principles must guide our choices, and in what order of priority the principles must be held. The priority set by the Church is not an optional opinion from which one can dissent. Remember: “Political choices faced by citizens not only have an impact on general peace and prosperity but also may affect the individual’s salvation.”⁴⁴

It amazes me each election year how, when I preach on principles, some Catholics walk out on me, some send hate mail, some threaten to call the IRS. All I do is teach the principles, which then lights a path to usually obvious choices. People then get upset as if I stood in the pulpit and said, “You better vote for X or you’re going to go to hell!” When Catholic principles make it clear what and who is acceptable, then our Church has done its job—it has taught us how to form and inform our conscience. But, as Archbishop Chaput said recently, “The more we transfer our passion for Jesus Christ to some political messiah or party platform, the more bitter we feel toward His Church when she speaks against the idols we set up in our own hearts. There’s no more damning moment in all of Scripture than John 19:15: ‘We have no king but Caesar.’ The only King Christians have is Jesus Christ.”⁴⁵ And He speaks through His Church. Too many Catholics are partisan before they are Christian, and because of it, many won’t listen to authentic teaching because they’ve already made up their minds to fill political offices with the party of their choice, whether those people support or even just tolerate what we Catholics believe.

Your conscience is not a cartoon character, it’s not a “moral permission slip,” it’s God’s voice trying to get your attention so that your faith will inform your vote. And I hope what I have said today has helped you in this process.

⁴⁴ FC 37-38.

⁴⁵ Archbishop Chaput, “We Have No King but Caesar’: Some Thoughts on Catholic Faith and Public Life,” September 22, 2012.