

# The Role of Conscience in Catholic Life

Revised 3/29/25

## Romans 1:21-25

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because **they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator**, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

## CNN New Day, Dec. 26, 2013, Fr. Edward Beck, C.P.:

"And people don't know, but that really is catholic teaching. From Vatican II, the Catholic Church's thought, you need to act in accord with your informed conscience. And if it goes against church law, church teaching, that's fine." (transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1312/26/nday.05.html)

## Herman Goring:

"I have no conscience. My conscience is called Adolf Hitler."

## Adolf Hitler:

"**Providence has ordained** that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing man from the restraints of an intelligence that has taken charge, from the dirty and degrading self-mortification of a false vision called conscience and morality, and from the demands of a freedom and independence which only a very few can bear." *"Hitler Speaks"*, by Hermann Rauschning, p. 222, 1939.

## Albert Gorres, German psychotherapist (1918-1996), frequently cited to by Cdl. Ratzinger (see below):

"All men need guilt feelings."

## Psalms 19:12-13:

"But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from my unknown faults."

Roman law: "Nemo iudex in causa sua" (No one is judge in his own case)

## Catechism of the Catholic Church on Conscience: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

**844** In their religious behavior, however, men also display the limits and errors that disfigure the image of God in them:

Very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and served the creature rather than the Creator. Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. [quoting from Lumen Gentium 16 and Romans 1:21, 25]

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Lumen Gentium (Document of Vatican II): [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

16. Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. In the first place, we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh (i.e., the Jews). On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of

their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. But often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel to every creature", the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.

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#### **Catechism of the Catholic Church:**

**1776** "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."

**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: (1749)

"Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; I mean that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise.... [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." [St. John Henry Cardinal Newman to the Duke of Norfolk]

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#### **The roots of today's problems with conscience:**

When the subject of conscience is raised, the famous sentence from St. John Henry Cardinal Newman in his letter to the Duke of Norfolk immediately comes up:

**"Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing), I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please, — still to conscience first and to the Pope afterwards."**

**Ultramontanism** [beyond the mountains (ultra montes), that is, beyond the Alps, 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries] is a clerical political conception within the Catholic Church that places strong emphasis on the prerogatives and powers of the Pope. It contrasts with Gallicanism, the belief that popular civil authority—often represented by the monarch's or state's authority—over the Church is comparable to that of the Pope. **From Wikipedia**

The **First Ecumenical Council of the Vatican**, commonly known as **Vatican I**, was the 20th ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. It opened on 8 December 1869 and was adjourned on 20 September 1870 after the Italian Capture of Rome. Its best-known decision is its definition of papal infallibility.

In the novel by Evelyn Waugh, **Brideshead Revisited**, 1959, p. 221, a priest asks a man: "'Supposing the Pope looked up and saw a cloud and said 'It's going to rain,' would that be bound to happen?' 'Oh, yes, Father.' 'But supposing it didn't?' He thought a moment and said, 'I suppose it would be sort of raining spiritually, only we were too sinful to see it.'"

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**1779** It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection: (1886)

## II. The Formation of Conscience

1783 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.**

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. (1742)

### Erroneous Judgment

1790 A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.

1791 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.

1792 Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct. If—on the contrary—the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.

**Conclusions:** CCC 1776 "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey.

**From the monastic rule of Saint Basil:** "The love of God is not founded on a discipline imposed on us from outside, but is constitutively established in us as the capacity and necessity of our rational nature." St. Basil speaks of "the spark of divine love which has been hidden in us." "We have received interiorly beforehand the capacity and disposition for observing all divine commandments ... These are not something imposed from without."

**J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011.** "The love of God which is concrete in the commandments, is not imposed on us from without, the Church Father emphasizes, but has been implanted in us beforehand. The sense for the good has been stamped upon us."

**St. Augustine adds:** "We could never judge that one thing is better than another if a basic understanding of the good had not already been instilled in us.

### Recall our discussion of Authority in the Church:

A thoughtful person truly concerned about doing the right thing will undergo such a healthy exercise in conscience formation, taking into consideration all these views:

- What does my family have to say about the issue?
- What do my trusted friends say?
- **What does the Church say?**
- What does society say?
- What does my mentor say?

While it is certainly helpful to listen to and evaluate the many voices speaking about any moral issue, what a Catholic needs to understand is that **the Church, as the authoritative voice of Jesus Christ himself, carries more weight than any other voices combined.** The Church alone speaks with the authority of Jesus, who speaks with the authority of God. Any decision-making process that puts Church teaching on an equal plane with other voices – or beneath them – is leading one down a dangerous path.