

January 25, 2007

Peace! All Affiliate Leaders

Twice a year, National VOTF designs an action meant to help affiliates stay focused on VOTF goals and energize your work. Our 2007 Lenten Action is unique and suitable for all affiliates because of its inherent flexibility. We believe it can be an enriching experience for you and the members of your affiliate. Lent is always a special time for introspection, contemplation and dialogue around faith-. This Lent our “action” is precisely that.

As we all prepare for the countdown to our national convention on Discipleship, Oct. 19-21, we are preparing internally first. We are preparing for a response from our inner voice through revelation, the Church’s position on conscience and optimally accepting the call to share in Christ’s mission of justice. This action is *introspective* in that we are looking for our membership to dialogue on the topic of conscience. We are asking you to prayerfully call upon the Spirit *contemplating* what conscience is calling **you** to do as the year evolves. It is *dialogue* because we have designed this Lent to be a communal immersion experience on the topic of conscience.

As always, the first step in discipleship is revelation. We have provided prayerful tools to begin this immersion experience. This Lent is very flexible to meet the needs of your individual affiliate and the issues germane to your parish, diocese, or region. Our design allows you to choose between 1-4 meetings to meet the usual meeting schedule of your affiliate. It allows yet another adaptation which could be used as a Lenten retreat day for your members. Whether you opt to choose 1 meeting or 4, the materials provided will help you maximize your time. The outcome we are looking for is recognition of our collective power if we respond to that inner voice for justice in our Church combined with naming the actions that are most relevant to your unique parish/diocesan situation.

We know that some responses will be dramatic; others may be a continuance of what you are currently doing, while others will be new, innovative, and different. That’s how the Spirit works! It will be at this crossroads that doubt will creep in. This is where we must have the resilience and reassurance that Jesus has called us to share in his life-giving mission through baptism. This is where we must all be mindful that Jesus’ call is counter-cultural and that is why He reassures us 366 times in the bible to not be afraid.

Many of us have spent hours, weeks, nay years reading, watching, complaining, and discussing the plight of our beloved Church. We must be cognizant that Christian spirituality is about discipleship and discipleship is anything but passive; but preparation is key to any action we take. We want to model the behavior we expect knowing full well that revelations such as we are about to engage in transforms people.

We pray you use these tools wisely so that we grow into reflective Catholics that take on Christ’s mantle for justice seriously.

Our wishes for a Lent steeped in the Spirit!

**The CIT (Convocation Implementation Team):**

Mary Pat Fox, Mark Mullaney, Hugh O’Regan, Susan Vogt, Sally Vance-Trembath, Vince Grenough, and Janet Hauter

## **VOTF: The Prayerful Voice during Lent**

*The format of the meetings is designed for ultimate flexibility and to meet the immediate needs of each affiliate. They can be used in a one-day Lenten retreat format (dividing the day into 1-4 components) or for any number of meetings that are appropriate for your affiliate to complement your current meeting schedule.*

### **MEETING #1**

*Meeting Objective: Engage participants into a dialogue around conscience. Because most have not had such a discussion in years, our objective is to have the dialogue open engaging many opinions, examples, and competing positions.*

#### **Opening Prayer:**

Leader: God of Hope, we come to You this evening with hope. Our hope may be weak and untested, mellowed by past experiences of hopes dashed, but we dare to hope again – because we must. We do not place our hope in human institutions, but in You, the author of hope and protector of our church. We are about to study and reflect on some of the deepest truths of right and wrong and how we come to decisions of conscience. We do not have to be learned or smart to do this, only honest – honest with ourselves in Your presence. We call on You tonight to strengthen our hope and honesty so that we may truly know Your will written in our hearts.

Pause for silent reflection: *What past decisions of conscience have I made? What process did I use?*

All: God of Hope, strengthen our hope, increase our self-knowledge, and help us to listen well to each other.

Discussion

#### **Closing Prayer:**

All: God of Hope, we tried. We thought, we listened, and now we leave. We leave not because we are finished. The work of discernment and faith is never finished, but we leave to continue to ponder the words of tonight's meeting. Stay with us till we meet again.

### **MEETING #2**

*Meeting Objective: Move from the personal opinion and experience to a prayerful institutional focus.*

#### **Opening Prayer:**

Leader: God of Truth, we come to You this evening seeking truth. To know what is right and what is wrong whether in thought or action is not easy. It IS easy to fool ourselves, however. As humans we may be tempted to rationalize, to follow blindly, to lead brazenly, or to do what is convenient. Guide us as we continue to discuss matters of conscience and probe our own conscience. Help us to know Your truth. Some of it may come from searching our own heart and some of it may come from listening to the wisdom of others. Always, however, we come back to Your law of love. How might a decision of conscience bring Your love more fully to the world.

Pause for silent reflection: *What are the issues of conscience before our church and VOTF today? (For example, When should we confront the hierarchy of our church about an injustice and how? Is it necessary to withhold money from the church even though that may hurt important charitable works? What church policies do I disagree with? Do any of them rise to the level which compels me to take action or leave the church?)*

All: God of Truth, enter our minds tonight and clear them of distractions and self-serving notions. Help us to recognize your truth in us.

Discussion

#### **Closing Prayer:**

All: God of Truth, we believe that You have been with us tonight in our thoughts and speech. We ask You to continue to guide us in seeking Your truth for the good of Your church.

### **MEETING #3**

*Meeting Objective: Tapping into the creativity of the sensus fidelium, what action/s make sense in light of the group's discernment and local events in your parish/diocese? What is the Spirit calling you to do?*

#### **Opening Prayer:**

Leader: God of Action, we have been seeking to know what is right and what is wrong, to form our consciences responsibly and prayerfully. But knowing what is right is not enough. We must decide when and how to act and when to be silent. You created the world and give it to us to sustain. Give us the wisdom to know how to create life-giving actions to build up Your church on earth.

Pause for silent reflection: *Think of at least one action that might flow from a decision of conscience that your affiliate has discussed in the previous meetings on conscience.*

All: God of Action, guide us as we ponder how to act on our conscience. Help us to face our fears and dispel our uncertainty so that we may clearly see Your will and have the courage to act on it.

Discussion

#### **Closing Prayer:**

All: God of Action, we've talked some more, considered some actions, and now go forth. Be with us as we act. Give us self-discipline, courage, and love for each of our neighbors, even our adversaries.

### **MEETING #4**

*Meeting Objective: Have discussion be action-centered focusing on what is do-able, what is practical and what is winnable. Develop a plan of action.*

#### **Opening Prayer:**

Leader: God of Wisdom, enlighten us with Your spirit that we may work to bring about Your love and justice within our hearts and in the hearts of all Your people. Strengthen us with insight to be faithful to Your word revealed among us. Grant this through the intercessions of all those who faithfully heard Your word and kept it.

Pause for silent reflection: *Again think of at least one action that might flow from a decision of conscience that your affiliate has discussed in the previous meetings on conscience.*

All: God of Wisdom, guide us as we ponder how to act on our conscience. Help us to face our fears and dispel our uncertainty so that we may clearly see Your will and have the courage to act on it.

Discussion

#### **Closing Prayer:**

All: God of Mystery, God of love, send Your Spirit into our hearts with gifts of wisdom and peace, fortitude and charity. We long to love and serve You. Faithful God, make us faithful. We ask this through the intercession of all Your saints. Amen.

## CATHOLIC TEACHING ON CONSCIENCE

*In an age of scandals, and the almost daily reporting of the mismanagement of Church affairs by the hierarchy in our secular press, Catholics today often find themselves faced with the question of what does the Catholic Church teach concerning individual conscience.*

### 1. What is conscience?

Conscience is "...the practical judgment or dictate of reason by which we judge what here and now is to be done as being good or to be avoided as evil"

[*Human Life in Our Day*, pastoral letter of the American hierarchy p.14]

### 2. Is conscience the ultimate authority?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, basing its teaching on the Gospels, Vatican II and on theologians like Saint Thomas and Cardinal Newman, affirms that it is Catholic teaching that the conscience is the ultimate authority: "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself". [CCC #1790]

### 3. What is the Catholic's obligation when forming one's conscience?

The Church recognizes that at times, the individual's conscience may be erroneous and the Church obligates every Catholic to seek the truth using every means at his/her disposal in order to resolve conflicts between Church Teaching and an individual's conscience. This obligation is what is meant by having an informed conscience and is most serious as it is more than just deciding a moral issue based on one's feelings or comfort with a teaching. The Individual must make an honest attempt to understand Church teaching and the gospel values promoted by that teaching. In making that attempt, Catholics may look at the arguments of responsible theologians in opposition to the teaching and to all areas of secular and scientific knowledge which might conflict with the teaching.

When it comes to fallible faith and moral teachings, or on Church policy teachings (fallible by their very nature), the Catholic may respectfully disagree and may even publicly work within the Church for change.

Examples of where changes in Church teaching have taken place abound in our history, issues such as the morality of slavery, religious freedom, separation of Church and State, priesthood and celibacy, the morality of charging interest, etc. On each of these issues and on many more our Church has modified and sometimes even reversed its teachings.

### 4. What rights do Catholics have to openly work for changes in non-infallible teaching and policy?

The 1983 Code of Canon Law explicitly gives:

- The Christian faithful the right to make known their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires to the pastors of the Church. [ *Canon 212 #2* ]
- They have the right and even at times a duty to manifest their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and **they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful**, with due regard for the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors, and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons.  
[ *Canon 212 #3* ]
- The Christian faithful are at liberty to freely found and govern associations for charitable and religious purposes or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world; **they are free to hold meetings to pursue these purposes in common.** [ *Canon 215* ]

## RESOURCE MATERIAL ON CONSCIENCE

*We encourage those who want more information on conscience to consult with these resources which complement our Lenten action.*

1. *Your Conscience and Church Teaching, How Do They Fit Together*  
By Rev. Nicholas Lohkamp, O.F.M.  
<http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1282.asp>
2. *Moral Conscience: Catholic Teaching for a Strong Faith*  
<http://www.beginningcatholic.com/conscience.html>
3. *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic*  
By Rev. Philip S. Kaufman, O.S.B. 1995 Crossroad Publishing Company
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*  
Article 6 Moral Conscience #1776 - #1782  
1995 , An Image Book – Doubleday
5. *When wrong turns out to be right*  
U.S. Catholic Magazine  
<http://www.catholicireland.net/pages/index.php?nd=185&art=276>
6. VIDEO: *The Vision of Vatican II for Today* published by St. Anthony Messenger Press (The one titled “The People Are the Church” by Rev. Michael J. Himes deals with conscience and “sensus fidelium.” Available from most diocesan education departments.)