

# On Moral Conscience

*Excerpts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church*



## Readings from the Catechism

*Selections from the Catechism have been taken from the Vatican's Web site, where the entire catechism is posted: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/ INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM)*

*Our selections are from Part Three (entitled Life in Christ), Chapter One (The Dignity of the Human Person), Article 6: Moral Conscience and Article 2: Participation in Social Life. Article 6 addresses the formation of conscience and choices made in accordance with conscience. Article 2 considers how decisions are made in terms of authority and the common good.*

### **Article 6: Moral Conscience**

**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.”<sup>47</sup>

#### **I. The Judgment of Conscience**

**1777** Moral conscience,<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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:

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.<sup>50</sup>

**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:

Return to your conscience, question it. . . . Turn inward, brethren, and in everything you do, see God as your witness.<sup>51</sup>

**1780** The dignity of the human person implies and requires *uprightness of moral conscience*. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the *prudent judgment* of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.

**1781** Conscience enables one to assume *responsibility* for the acts performed. If man commits evil, the just judgment of conscience can remain within him as the witness to the universal truth of the good, at the same time as the evil of his particular choice. The verdict of the judgment of conscience remains a pledge of hope and mercy. In attesting to the fault committed, it 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:

We shall . . . reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.<sup>52</sup>

**1782** 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.”<sup>53</sup>

## **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.

**1785** In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path,<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

### **III. To Choose in Accord with Conscience**

**1786** 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.

**1787** Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law.

**1788** To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

**1789** Some rules apply in every case:

- One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
- The Golden Rule: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."<sup>56</sup>
- Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one's neighbor and his conscience: "Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience . . . you sin against Christ."<sup>57</sup> Therefore "it is right not to . . . do anything that makes your brother stumble."<sup>58</sup>

### **IV. 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."<sup>59</sup> 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.

**1793** 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.

**1794** A good and pure conscience is enlightened by true faith, for charity proceeds at the same time "from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith."<sup>60</sup>

The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by objective standards of moral conduct.<sup>61</sup>

## **IN BRIEF (Article 6)**

**1795** "Conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths." (*GS 16*).

**1796** Conscience is a judgment of reason by which the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.

**1797** For the man who has committed evil, the verdict of his conscience remains a pledge of conversion and of hope.

**1798** 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. Everyone must avail himself of the means to form his conscience.

**1799** 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.

**1800** A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience.

**1801** Conscience can remain in ignorance or make erroneous judgments. Such ignorance and errors are not always free of guilt.

**1802** The Word of God is a light for our path. We must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. This is how moral conscience is formed.

47 *Gaudium et spes* 16. [document of Vatican II Council]  
48 Cf. Rom 2:14-16.  
49 Cf. Rom 1:32.  
50 John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II* (London: Longmans Green, 1885), 248.  
51 St. Augustine, In ep Jo. 8, 9: PL 35, 2041. (Letter to John)  
52 1 Jn 3:19-20.  
53 *Dignitatis humanae* 3 # 2. [document of Vatican II Council]  
54 Cf. Ps 119:105.  
55 Cf. *Dignitatis humanae* 14.  
56 Mt 7:12; cf. Lk 6:31; Tob 4:15.  
57 1 Cor 8:12.  
58 Rom 14:21.  
59 *Gaudium et spes* 16.  
60 1 Tim 5; cf. 8:9; 2 Tim 3; 1 Pet 3:21; Acts 24:16.  
61 *Gaudium et spes* 16.

## **Article 2: Participation in Social Life**

### **I. Authority**

**1897** "Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested with legitimate authority to preserve its institutions and to devote themselves as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all."<sup>15</sup>

By "authority" one means the quality by virtue of which persons or institutions make laws and give orders to men and expect obedience from them.

**1898** Every human community needs an authority to govern it.<sup>16</sup> The foundation of such authority lies in human nature. It is necessary for the unity of the state. Its role is to ensure as far as possible the common good of the society.

**1899** The authority required by the moral order derives from God: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."<sup>17</sup>

**1900** The duty of obedience requires all to give due honor to authority and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude and good-will.

Pope St. Clement of Rome provides the Church's most ancient prayer for political authorities:<sup>18</sup> "Grant to them, Lord, health, peace, concord, and stability, so that they may exercise without offense the sovereignty that

you have given them. Master, heavenly King of the ages, you give glory, honor, and power over the things of earth to the sons of men. Direct, Lord, their counsel, following what is pleasing and acceptable in your sight, so that by exercising with devotion and in peace and gentleness the power that you have given to them, they may find favor with you.”<sup>19</sup>

**1901** If authority belongs to the order established by God, “the choice of the political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free decision of the citizens.”<sup>20</sup>

The diversity of political regimes is morally acceptable, provided they serve the legitimate good of the communities that adopt them. Regimes whose nature is contrary to the natural law, to the public order, and to the fundamental rights of persons cannot achieve the common good of the nations on which they have been imposed.

**1902** Authority does not derive its moral legitimacy from itself. It must not behave in a despotic manner, but must act for the common good as a “moral force based on freedom and a sense of responsibility”:<sup>21</sup>

A human law has the character of law to the extent that it accords with right reason, and thus derives from the eternal law. Insofar as it falls short of right reason it is said to be an unjust law, and thus has not so much the nature of law as of a kind of violence.<sup>22</sup>

**1903** Authority is exercised legitimately only when it seeks the common good of the group concerned and if it employs morally licit means to attain it. If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order, such arrangements would not be binding in conscience. In such a case, “authority breaks down completely and results in shameful abuse.”<sup>23</sup>

**1904** “It is preferable that each power be balanced by other powers and by other spheres of responsibility which keep it within proper bounds. This is the principle of the ‘rule of law,’ in which the law is sovereign and not the arbitrary will of men.”<sup>24</sup>

## **II. The Common Good**

**1905** In keeping with the social nature of man, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which in turn can be defined only in reference to the human person:

Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek the common good together.<sup>25</sup>

**1906** By common good is to be understood “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and

more easily.”<sup>26</sup> The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority. It consists of *three essential elements*:

**1907** First, the common good presupposes *respect for the person* as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfill his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as “the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard . . . privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion.”<sup>27</sup>

**1908** Second, the common good requires the *social well-being and development* of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.<sup>28</sup>

**1909** Finally, the common good requires *peace*, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the *security* of society and its members. It is the basis of the right to legitimate personal and collective defense.

**1910** Each human community possesses a common good which permits it to be recognized as such; it is in the *political community* that its most complete realization is found. It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.

**1911** Human interdependence is increasing and gradually spreading throughout the world. The unity of the human family, embracing people who enjoy equal natural dignity, implies a *universal common good*. This good calls for an organization of the community of nations able to “provide for the different needs of men; this will involve the sphere of social life to which belong questions of food, hygiene, education, . . . and certain situations arising here and there, as for example . . . alleviating the miseries of refugees dispersed throughout the world, and assisting migrants and their families.”<sup>29</sup>

**1912** The common good is always oriented towards the progress of persons: “The order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around.”<sup>30</sup> This order is founded on truth, built up in justice, and animated by love.

### **III. Responsibility and Participation**

**1913** “Participation” is the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange. It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role,

in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person.

**1914** Participation is achieved first of all by taking charge of the areas for which one assumes *personal responsibility*: by the care taken for the education of his family, by conscientious work, and so forth, man participates in the good of others and of society.<sup>31</sup>

**1915** As far as possible citizens should take an active part in *public life*. The manner of this participation may vary from one country or culture to another. “One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom.”<sup>32</sup>

**1916** As with any ethical obligation, the participation of all in realizing the common good calls for a continually renewed *conversion* of the social partners. Fraud and other subterfuges, by which some people evade the constraints of the law and the prescriptions of societal obligation, must be firmly condemned because they are incompatible with the requirements of justice. Much care should be taken to promote institutions that improve the conditions of human life.<sup>33</sup>

**1917** It is incumbent on those who exercise authority to strengthen the values that inspire the confidence of the members of the group and encourage them to put themselves at the service of others. Participation begins with education and culture. “One is entitled to think that the future of humanity is in the hands of those who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for life and optimism.”<sup>34</sup>

## **IN BRIEF (Article 2)**

**1918** “There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (*Rom* 13:1).

**1919** Every human community needs an authority in order to endure and develop.

**1920** “The political community and public authority are based on human nature and therefore . . . belong to an order established by God” (*Gaudium et spes* 74 § 3).

**1921** Authority is exercised legitimately if it is committed to the common good of society. To attain this it must employ morally acceptable means.

**1922** The diversity of political regimes is legitimate, provided they contribute to the good of the community.

**1923** Political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order and must guarantee the conditions for the exercise of freedom.

**1924** The common good comprises “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” (*Gaudium et spes* 26 1).

**1925** The common good consists of three essential elements: respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person; prosperity, or the development of the spiritual and temporal goods of society; the peace and security of the group and of its members.

**1926** The dignity of the human person requires the pursuit of the common good. Everyone should be concerned to create and support institutions that improve the conditions of human life.

**1927** It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society. The common good of the whole human family calls for an organization of society on the international level.

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15 John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* 46.

16 Cf. Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*; *Diuturnum illud*.

17 Rom 13:1-2; cf. 1 Pet 2:13-17.

18 Cf. as early as 1 Tim 2:1-2.

19 St. Clement of Rome, *Ad Cor.* 61: *Sources Chretiennes* 167,198-200.

20 *Gaudium er spes* 74 § 3.

21 *Gaudium er spes* 74 § 2.

22 St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I-II, 93, 3, ad 2. (*Summa Theologica*)

23 John XXIII *Pacem in terris* 51.

24 *Centesimus Annos* 44.

25 *Ep. Barnabae*, 4,10: PG 2, 734.

26 *Gaudium er spes* 26 § 1; cf. GS 74 § 1.

27 *Gaudium er spes* 26 § 2.

28 Cf. *Gaudium er spes* 26 § 2.

29 *Gaudium er spes* 84 § 2.

30 *Gaudium er spes* 26 § 3.

31 Cf. *Centesimus Annos* 43.

32 *Gaudium er spes* 31 § 3.

33 Cf. *Gaudium er spes* 30 § 1.

34 *Gaudium er spes* 31 § 3.