



Understanding Conscience

One of the central themes in the U.S. Bishops' document "The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" is the notion of conscience. Our

consciences are formed by many influences through our lives, including our parents and teachers, church teaching and prayer. Secular forces are very effective in shaping attitudes—materialism and nationalism can distort our loyalty to Gospel values. "Catholics have a serious and lifelong obligation to form their consciences in accord with human reason and the teachings of the Church." (no.17) The Bishops go on to list elements which should be included in the formation of conscience:

- ❖ "A desire to embrace goodness and truth" that should begin with a "willingness and openness to seek the truth and what is right by studying Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church"
- ❖ A necessity to "examine the facts and background information about various choices"
- ❖ Prayerful reflection

Other Church documents add further enlightenment:

- ❖ Conscience is a person's "secret core and sanctuary" (*Gaudium et Spes* 16). As such it must be respected by others and by ourselves.
- ❖ "We bishops seek to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with the truth" (*Summary* of bishops' statement). Our conscience is to submit to the altar of the truth and not to any other authority. "[Every person] is obliged to follow faithfully what he [or she] knows to be just and right" *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1778.
- ❖ "The Word of God is a principal tool in the formation of conscience when it is assimilated by study, prayer, and practice." *The United States Catholic Catechism*, p. 314.

The virtues of prudence and courage are necessary as we live out the dictates of our conscience. Decisions of conscience do not always make us popular or loved by others. Prudence also tells us we may have to choose the lesser evil when there is no good choice before us.

Each faith tradition reflects on specific moral issues and offers guidance to its members. Not all faith traditions come to the same conclusions on moral issues, ranging from dancing and appropriate clothing to the death penalty, abortion, war, etc. Individuals within the faith tradition may not agree with the official position of their faith community. As adult Christians, we are to take responsibility for the conscientious decisions we make. In a concrete situation, each person must follow his or her conscience, even if it is an erroneous conscience. (*Catechism 1800 and 1790*) Cultivating an informed conscience is a lifelong effort, anchored in prayerful reflection, and nourished by our faith community.