

## In Freedom and Responsibility

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### Our Consciences: Ourselves

The foundation of good moral-decision making is ourselves, that is, as far as the moral life is concerned, our consciences. We seek to live in a way that will develop a good or sincere conscience and the source of a good conscience is *conversion*. Jesus begins the synoptic Gospels with the great call to conversion: 'Reform your lives because the Kingdom of God is at hand!' – be open to the gifts of the Kingdom, to God's call in your lives. How is God helping us to become the persons we can be – open-hearted, loving, just, generous, truthful and self-giving? Each of us is called in the particular circumstances of our lives to be open to the gifts of the Kingdom. How can we welcome life, without false or escapist manoeuvres, and find the love of God in it, accepting both the joys and hardships of our daily circumstances as part of our discipleship of Jesus? The disciple can only follow the example of the master. After healing and ministering to the people, Jesus sought solitude and prayer, communing with 'Abba', his dear father. In prayer, we open ourselves to conversion, to the grace of God which can lead our hearts towards true life.



What are the fruits of conversion? The more we attempt to be open to the Kingdom of God in our own lives, the easier it is to bring some key attitudes to decision-making.

*Empathy:* An openness to the Kingdom gives us the assurance that God loves us – and this assurance helps us to be less concerned about constantly protecting our own interests, in the fear that we will 'lose out' or not get enough out of life. This helps us be free to be concerned for others, to lift our gaze beyond ourselves towards our neighbour in need, near or far. The word 'empathy' comes from the Greek words for 'in' and 'suffering': through empathy we 'suffer in' the situation of others, reach beyond our concern for ourselves to the needs of others. When we are making decisions that affect others, the effort to empathize with them and to understand their perspective will help us to make decisions that are more sensitive and adequate to the human situations that we are involved in.

*Self-Confidence:* The assurance that we are loved by God, for ourselves and as we are, can also bring self-confidence. This is important to making moral decisions, since decisions involve taking and accepting responsibility. We hope to be able to take a stand against injustice, for example, because we are confident in ourselves and value our own freedom and responsibility. Sometimes our own background, perhaps a strong and loving family life, can be very helpful in developing and strengthening our self-confidence and esteem. Yet, whatever our own human circumstances, we can seek confidence, or 'fortitude' as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

## Informing Conscience

We hope to come to moral decision-making in a spirit of conversion, with empathy and self-confidence. To make good moral decisions, however, we not only need to be converted, we also need knowledge about the world 'out there', this complex world in which we seek to make decisions that are relevant, helpful, and objectively correct. Sincerity seeks the truth, well-based knowledge that will help others. What are the key sources of knowledge and insight? How do we deploy them to make moral decisions? Three in particular need emphasis: factual knowledge, Church tradition and reason.

**Factual Knowledge:** What are good sources of factual information about the issue in question? We benefit from living in a free society with an extraordinary growth in information technology. At the same time we face the challenge of critically evaluating the sources of information that we can access in the media marketplace. Since most of the media are commercially driven, seeking to make a profit through news that is often sensationalist or reflecting passing fads and interests, they need a careful and critical reading. Many issues – especially situations of long-term injustice in our own society and in the world at large – are barely discussed in commercial media. Since individualism is so strong in our society, media attention tends to be on issues affecting individual achievement and satisfaction. So, other sources of information are very important to redress the balance.

**Church Tradition:** In what ways can the tradition of the Church guide and inform our moral decisions? We can consider tradition both in terms of the Bible and in terms of Church teaching.

**The Bible:** Apart from its extraordinary power to lead us to conversion, the Bible is also the key source of our knowledge of the meaning and 'shape' of a Christian life, of how we should live in a way that befits who we are as 'the image of God'. Yet it is also well-known that the Bible is an enormously diverse and complex book, requiring careful and well-informed interpretation in order to enable its meaning and message to shed light on our contemporary lives. In this sense, the Bible is part of a tradition of interpretation, a tradition that is the key source of Church teaching.

**Church Teaching:** From its beginnings in the first Christian communities, the Church has been involved in interpreting the Word of God in the light of changing circumstances. Should Christians own slaves? Should Christians fight in the army? Should a Christian eat meat that might have been offered to an idol? This last example, drawn from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, shows us that the burning moral questions of one era can seem rather obscure and irrelevant to another. It also shows us that Church teaching must speak to the urgent issues of each place and time. It is also the case, as was recognised by Vatican II, that the Church's teaching authority does not claim to have an answer to every question. Often it teaches general principles that the members of the Church have the responsibility to apply in particular circumstances.

The Church's moral teaching is the attempt by the Church to be faithful to the Word of God in ways that respond to the moral demands of our humanity. Sometimes this teaching concerns matters that remain relevant in every time and place, such as the Church's defence of innocent human life and its prophetic preaching against injustice and anything that degrades our humanity. Other Church teachings are oriented towards particular problems: in our age, not whether we should eat meat offered to idols, but whether – for example – we should use embryos that are discarded from IVF processes for stem cell research, or whether the circumstances of Australia's involvement in the invasion of Iraq met the conditions for a just war that the Church has been developing since ancient times.

**Reason:** We seek to approach moral decisions with self-confidence, informed by a critical examination of the sources of information available to us, and using our powers of reasoning to make relevant, sincere and truthful decisions. The role of Church teaching is to aid this decision-making process, to assist us in informing our consciences so that we are able to overcome the limitations of our own ego, our own society and culture, and the pressure of circumstances, and to benefit from the wisdom of a tradition that has been developing this teaching over the centuries in the light of the Word of God and the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The Church's teaching helps to form our conscience, yet does not replace it – our conscience decision is our own, made in the light of prayer and a sense of God's loving purpose for us.

Reasoning about moral questions can include a number of ways of using our God-given intelligence. *Analytical* reasoning helps us to break things into their component parts so we can more effectively assess what is at stake: how is euthanasia, an act intended to end pain by ending life, different from giving a drug that will ease pain and perhaps hasten death without the intention of ending life? *Critical* reasoning can help us to avoid simply accepting the assumptions of our culture: is our way of life and consumption of resources justified – what are the real alternatives in the light of the ecological crisis? Finally, *imaginative* reasoning can help us to see solutions that only become apparent when we make a creative, empathetic effort to imagine a better way: how can individuals and communities achieve reconciliation? What are the right words to speak and the right gestures to make?

Finally, we make a decision, or *judgement*. It is our own, made in freedom and responsibility, based in a conscience that we have done our best to form in the light of the wisdom of the Church and the other sources of wisdom available to us. We know that our decisions will never be completely free of bias and self-seeking, but we make them in the confidence that comes from opening our hearts in prayer to the power of the Spirit to lead us to the truth.