

A well-formed conscience is a wise guide

Conscience enables us to recognize the morality of something we are about to do, are in the process of doing, or have already done. It helps us take responsibility for our actions, prompts us to ask forgiveness when we fail, and produces peaceful hearts. A well-formed conscience is a messenger of God, who teaches us how to do good and avoid evil.

The formation of a good conscience is a lifelong process, and it begins with the loving guidance of parents. As we grow older and find ourselves free of parental control, we must take responsibility for the education of our consciences. That entails serious interior reflection, something not always valued in our era of quick fixes and instant gratification. Forming a good conscience requires that we slow down, reflect, pray, and learn.

How do we properly educate and form our consciences? By studying the Word of God, praying for God's wisdom, relying on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, following good example, seeking sound advice from others, and allowing ourselves to be guided by the teaching of the Church.

The formation of a good conscience requires humility. I must admit that there is such a thing as moral truth which, though it may not be easy and may go against popular trends, is given to us by God for our good and must be obeyed. Moreover, since this moral truth comes from God, it is meant for all humanity, not just for believers.

The Truth: not a product of one's imagination

The formation of conscience is actually about conversion and discipleship. Am I willing to hand over every aspect of my life, every decision, and every moral judgment, to God's wisdom? Or do I keep some things for myself, as if God knows best in some areas but not others? Perhaps it is easier to follow trends and opinion polls, but they will inevitably change – as will governments and presidents – and I will be left in the lurch. Only a well-formed conscience keeps me on solid moral ground. I owe it to my country to form my conscience well.

Pope John Paul II wrote:

“Let us remember: it is only by listening to the voice of God in our most intimate being, and by acting in accordance with its directions, that we will reach the freedom we yearn for. As Jesus said, only the truth can make us free. And the truth is not the fruit of each individual's imagination. God gave us intelligence to know the truth and the will to achieve what is morally good. He has given us the light of conscience to guide our moral decisions – and, above all, to love good and avoid evil.”



Further Reflections on the Meaning of “Conscience”

Bishop Peter Sartain

Our lives must be tended and nurtured

When an infant develops into a toddler, his or her newly acquired mobility presents a challenge to parents! Crawling limbs can now go where they should not go. Tiny hands can grab things they should not grab. Growing but fragile bodies can bump into sharp surfaces and tumble down stairs. Houses have to be baby-proofed, hazardous materials placed out of reach. Moms and dads get plenty of exercise following the kids around the house.

Physical growth is a natural, beautiful part of every life – it demonstrates the potential we have in countless areas and the wisdom of God's creative hand. But human development must be guided, taught, and formed. No responsible parents would ever leave a little one to fend for herself, assuming she could pick up skills and lessons to be learned on her own. They teach her to walk, carefully show her the difference between “hot” and “cold,” deny her certain foods that would be bad for her, protect her from hidden dangers, keep her clean, hug and praise her constantly, and love her unconditionally. They would not think of doing otherwise.

Our lives of faith must be similarly guided, taught, and formed. No Christian parents would ever think of letting their son fend for himself in learning about God, since they know faith is God's gift to be cherished and passed on. They teach him about God and how to pray. They take him to church and help with his prayers each night. They give good example and show him what faith in action means. They instill in him reverence for God and a proper sense of religious obligation. They know that faith in God is essential to every human life.

Our conscience is formed with loving care

In the same way, when it comes to the development of our conscience, we must be guided, taught, and formed. No wise parents would ever think of telling little children, “Do whatever you want,” for disaster would not be far away. They teach them the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. They explain the meaning of sin. They demonstrate proper behavior and respect for others. They set down rules and expect them to be followed. They lay out principles by which their children can make good decisions. They find the

proper time to instruct them in sexual morality and give good example in family life. They teach them how to say both “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you.” They encourage and support them when they fail.

It is especially important that parents teach children the intimate connection between one’s relationship with God and the formation of conscience, because growth in both is life-long – and destined for eternity.

True morality has its source and goal in God. The moral law is God’s gift to us, through which we are guided, taught, formed, and led to union with him. God has given us freedom, and he never coerces us to love him or denies us the use of freedom, even in the most delicate and complicated matters. However, he also offers us the wisdom to use our freedom properly by doing good and avoiding evil. We were made for God – we were made for good – and God knows we will never be happy when doing evil. Evil is beneath our dignity, for we were made in God’s image and likeness.

A voice speaks lovingly within us

The fathers of the second Vatican Council gave a beautiful definition of “conscience” in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”:

“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 (16).”

Commenting on this passage, Pope John Paul II wrote:

“Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person, where we are alone with God. In the depths of our conscience, we detect a moral law, which does not impose itself on us, but which holds us to a higher obedience. This law is not an external human law, but the voice of God, calling us to free ourselves from the grip of evil desires and sin, and stimulating us to seek what is good and true in life.”

If freedom is to be full and authentic, it must be educated by the formation of a right conscience; otherwise, we risk misusing our freedom and falling into evil, intentionally or unintentionally. God, our loving and protective Father, would never think of leaving us to fend for ourselves in living good, moral, and holy lives. He guides, teaches, and forms us as his children, giving us everything we need to grow in faith and goodness.

Freedom is guided by a well-formed conscience

When the communist governments of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe fell in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the citizens of those countries faced immediate and critical

challenges. Liberation from the tyranny and oppression they had known for so long was a great blessing. But freedom is more than release from tyranny. How would they put freedom to work for the common good?

With economies in shambles, new systems of free enterprise had to be created. Since there was little effective government infrastructure, democratic processes had to be put in place. Since civil order and public safety had been in the hands of an often terrorist military, provision had to be made for adequate and humane police protection. And since the majority of government budgets had been given to military spending, it was necessary to reorganize priorities with primary concern for people, not military might.

But there was also a subtle and ultimately more important challenge facing the people: how to use their personal freedom in a changed society. Vast new opportunities, choices, and influences were open to them (particularly the young) for the first time. It was in part for all these reasons that Pope John Paul II wrote his encyclical “The Splendor of Truth” in 1993.

Knowing right from wrong sets us free

We Americans have much to learn from the growing pains of former communist countries. Ironically, there are many in our society who regard moral norms as a form of tyranny and oppression – they think one should be able to do as he or she pleases, “free” of all moral guidelines. According to their frame of reference, what one chooses to do is “right” and “good” precisely because he or she chooses it – not because the choice was made according to a set of moral norms.

There are others who assume (perhaps unwittingly) that if a poll demonstrates that the majority of Americans holds a particular opinion about a moral issue, that opinion must be morally correct. If we lived totally according to that approach, a majority vote would determine morality, and morality would change as the numbers change. Isn’t that backwards? It’s what Pope Benedict XVI has called “the tyranny of public opinion.”

Such approaches are not examples of “freedom” at all, and we should regard them with great suspicion. They would create a society which crumbles because it has no lasting foundation. Just because “I choose” something does not make it right – after all, I am capable of choosing evil. The fact that 75% holds this or that opinion regarding a moral issue does not make their opinion morally correct – sadly, they might be ignorant of the truth.

What is right, good, and true has one source, and that is God. It is only in searching for his truth and obeying it that we find freedom. The path to real freedom, then, is the formation of a good conscience.