

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Moral Life: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

Moral Life: The Role of Conscience

THEME

The role of conscience in the application of Christian moral principles.

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to:

1. Articulate the role of conscience in the application of Catholic Christian moral principles.
2. Define what it means to be a moral person in the Catholic Tradition.
3. Identify methods for informing one's conscience and making moral decisions.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

#1691-98; 1783-1802; 2030-40; 2047; 2049-2051

FOCUSING THE STUDY

What is morality? What does it mean to be a moral person? Morality has been described as a special kind of knowing: a “knowing of what ought to be done.” A traditional definition of morality calls it “the science of what humans ought to do by reason of who they are.” Catholic morality draws on three main sources of knowledge to reach conclusions on how we should act: human resource (our God-given intellects), human experience (the collective wisdom of others, living and dead), and divine revelation (the teachings of God as found in the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church and in the life of Jesus Christ).

INTRODUCTION

Morality is a response to a loving God and a continuing venture to become fully the persons God wants us to be. We are able to respond to God because of the following:

Intelligence and freedom - God has given us intelligence to know the truth and has created us as free beings with dignity, who share in God's own life.

Help of the Holy Spirit - Through baptism, the Holy Spirit comes to us and bestows on us many gifts. These gifts enable us to follow the way of Christ, to walk on a path that leads to a fully human and moral life. The Holy Spirit allows Jesus to live in and work through us and gives us the ability to make Christ-like choices.

Support of the Church - Through the Church, we receive God's Word which contains Christ's law of love. The Church confers the graces of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, through which Jesus comes to us and empowers us to worship God. The Christian community provides the example and inspiration of many Christian heroes (saints) who have lived faithful lives.

Guidance of the magisterium – The Church's divinely appointed authority to teach the truths of religion is referred to as the magisterium. The Church's teaching office, vested in the Pope and bishops as the successors of the Apostles, possesses Christ's own authority to teach (and to designate others to teach), in his name, the truths of salvation that pertain to faith and morals.

Help of Jesus Christ, God's own son and our savior - Jesus is our model and norm of what a fully human life should be. To be moral is to imitate Jesus and to allow him into our lives.

DEFINING CONSCIENCE

A dictionary definition of conscience is “the awareness of a moral or ethical aspect to one's conduct together with the urge to prefer right over wrong.” This is *not* a complete definition from a Catholic Christian understanding of conscience. To understand that, let's begin by looking at what conscience is *not*.

Conscience is not a majority opinion

There are those who claim conscience is simply a matter of doing what the crowd does. If everyone is doing it, then it must be okay. This view of conscience surrenders personal behavior to conform to popular opinion and practice.



Conscience is not a feeling

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A soft drink advertisement once proclaimed, “when you make a choice, what’s right is what feels right.” This view of conscience holds that individuals are the creators of their own moral rules and are only answerable to themselves. This perspective holds sincerity as the prime value. “As long as I am sincere, and have a good intention, then what I do is okay.” The trouble with feelings, whether they are good or bad, is that our feelings may be out of touch with reality, and with what is truly right or wrong.

Conscience is not the super-ego

The psychiatrist Sigmund Freud saw conscience as the super-ego, that is, the leftover rules of childhood that we carry around in our subconscious. The super-ego is like an attic in an old house. Instead of containing furniture, we carry around all the “shoulds” and “have-to’s” that we absorbed from the authority figures in our lives. We follow these rules because we want approval (love) from these authority figures, not because we personally see or understand the value of the rules on our own.

Conscience is not a gut-instinct

With little thought or study, some people will make moral decisions based on gut-instinct: “My hunch tells me I should act this way.” Although a gut-reaction or hunch to moral situations can be a helpful start in a decision-making process involving morality, a Christian conscience is much more grown-up. It applies one’s intellect and judgment to figure out how we are to love both God and others.

Conscience is not “Jiminy Cricket”

Some people think of conscience as an internal voice, a separate person who lives inside of us, dictating to us what we should do. Conscience is not what the wooden-boy Pinocchio thought it was: a cricket whispering what to do or what not to do. Neither is conscience a guardian angel whispering in our ear.

Conscience is not a myth

Finally, some people deny the very existence of personal conscience. These skeptics believe conscience is a fake concept, the creation of organized religions to help control people through guilt. In the last analysis, the denial of conscience results in each person doing his/her own thing, with little regard for personal responsibility or any special consideration for the rights of others. The denial of conscience leads to the death of morality.

What Conscience is

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1778) provides an excellent definition of conscience: “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.” The documents of the Second Vatican Council reveal more about the meaning of conscience in this definition:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: to shun this or that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it, he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor (*Church in the Modern World* #16).

This definition reveals three interlocking aspects of conscience, all of which deal with our awareness of moral truth. They are:

Conscience is awareness of God’s call to be - Vatican II teaches that our conscience is the secret place at the core of our beings where we are alone with God. There we can hear God’s loving invitation to each of us to be the persons he calls us to be from all eternity: God’s special child, made in God’s image and likeness. Thus conscience is very personal.



Conscience is awareness of God’s call to know and to do the good, that is, to love - Our vocation as persons with profound dignity is to reflect our God, who is love. We do this when we respond to the good. We do this when we love. We do this when we shun that which is evil. We do this when we obey the law written in our hearts: the law of love of God and neighbor as oneself. Conscience is a basic awareness of good and evil.

Conscience is a practical judgment of the intellect - This judgment helps us in the here-and-now of a particular, concrete act to discover the loving path and to avoid the path that is evil. Conscience is very practical. It urges us to do good or keep from doing evil, it guides us in doing an action, or judges actions already performed as good or evil.

FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

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These three points stress the personal nature of conscience, that is, an individual call by God to be a loving person, to search for moral truth, to do good in the concrete, here-and-now situation. In our daily routine, most of our decisions of conscience are implicit. We then make them from rote or habit and give them little thought. They result from our already acquired values and attitudes. A good habit is a virtue that empowers us to do good with ease.



In contrast to most of our daily choices, when we have more important decisions to make, we will typically take the time to make a more explicit and deliberate reference to our conscience. There are times when we have to use the “**Stop Sign**” approach to search out the facts, to think about alternatives and consequences, to consult others, and to pray about how God wants us to respond in love to this concrete situation.

Christians are called to incorporate the following important principles regarding conscience: 1) You must always form and keep informing your conscience and 2) You must follow your conscience. With this in mind, let’s look at a method for making moral decisions that is known by the acronym SEER: study, elect, execute, and review.

Study - Conscience is concerned with discovering objective truth so we do not simply act on our feelings or preferences. A key principle of Catholic morality is that we must form our conscience and work throughout our lives to keep them informed. This requires study accompanied by reflection and deliberation.

Concerning a particular decision that we must make soon, we should gather information about the moral object (what is being done), the motives, and the circumstances involved in particular decisions. We then consider the various options within them and the consequences that flow from each. Following are some fundamental principles of morality that hold in every case:

- Never do evil so that good may result from it (a good end does not justify evil means to attain it).
- Do unto others what you would have them do unto you (The Golden Rule, Mt. 7:12).
- Love your neighbor as yourself (Rom. 14:21).

To guard against prejudice and self-interest, persons of conscience will seek the advice of trusted moral mentors. Also it is necessary in making moral decisions to take the time for self-reflection, to examine true motives, and to look at past experiences in similar situations.

Elect - After studying the issues involved in a particular situation, it is time to elect, that is, to choose the right course of action. Your decision should ultimately be based on whether your proposed action is consistent with who you are as God’s special creation, made in His image and likeness. An essential part of making this decision is be in the presence of the Lord and to pray. Seeking counsel in prayer is a way to slow down and react against a culture that constantly seeks instant gratification. The listening part of prayer means to play close attention to how the Lord might be speaking to us through our intellects, imaginations, and memories. In addition, we should also pay attention to how the Lord might be touching our emotions, judging if a proposed action “feels right,” whether it is consistent with who we really are. Finally, in prayer, we should ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen our wills with the gift of fortitude so that we might have the courage to do what our conscience tells us is the right thing to do, especially when that action is counter-cultural.



Execute - Execution is the next part of making a moral decision. This involves putting into action what you have decided in conscience is the right course of action at this time. Execution involves responsibility. We must do what our conscience tells us is right. When we do not, we sin.

Review - Our conscience not only helps us to discern the right course of action before we decide and as we act, but it also helps us to evaluate and reflect on actions we have already performed. Many saints throughout the ages have recommended a nightly “examination of conscience,” a review of our day to discover what we have done or not done to become or not to become, the kind of person the Lord calls us to be.

CONCLUSION

Even well-formed consciences can make mistakes. The formation of conscience is a life-long task. Conscience is never perfectly formed; it is always forming by staying in-formed. If you follow your conscience in good faith, even if you later find out that it was objectively mistaken, you are not guilty of sin. On the other hand, if you violate your conscience, even if you later find out it was wrong, you are guilty. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lists other factors that can lead us into making bad conscience decisions. These are:

- Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel
- Rejecting Church authority and Church teaching in areas of

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- The bad example of other people
- Enslavement to one's passions
- Holding a false idea of the autonomy of conscience (for example: "No one can tell me what to do. I am my own law.")
- morality
- Lack of true repentance
- Lack of love.

One of the major reasons for an erroneous conscience is ignorance. Sometimes a person may have overlooked an important factor, or simply was never taught the truth about some issue in morality. Another type of ignorance results from insincerity. In this case, a person makes little or no effort to discover what the truth is or where goodness lies. This type of person is lazy or closed-minded. For example, consider a person who is trying to judge a moral course of action in regards to an issue of confidentiality. Instead of consulting wise and experienced individuals who are known for their tact, the person in question immediately "blabs" about what he/she heard in confidence. This person is blameworthy for the harm he/she caused because he/she should have taken the trouble to find out the moral thing to do. Another sign of an insincere conscience is the person who has fallen into a bad habit of sinfulness that makes choosing evil an easy thing to do. Faith in Jesus Christ, prayer, and seeking the guidance of our Christ-appointed teachers can help us form a good and pure conscience.

REVIEW/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader (e.g., a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc.).

Review Questions

1. List and discuss the four wrong ideas of conscience.
2. What are the two key principles regarding conscience?
3. What three moral rules must never be violated when making conscientious decisions?
4. Must a person always follow his/her conscience? Why or why not?
5. List several factors that can lead to an erroneous conscience.

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

What would you do?

Here are situations that require conscientious decision-making. Draw on what you have learned to answer each situation.

- ◆ *The Wallet* - You find a wallet containing \$500. From the identification papers in the wallet, you conclude that its owner is very wealthy. What would you do?
- ◆ *Sexist Remarks* - At lunch, some people at your table are making some strong sexist comments about women in general. What would you do?

For each of the following situations, decide which mistaken idea of conscience is represented. Give reasons for your choices.

1. A mission collection is being taken up for some orphans in hurricane-stricken Guatemala. Louise decides she must contribute \$10 so that her teacher will think she is generous.
2. Carl is at work in a fast-food restaurant when some mentally-challenged adults come in to place an order. His co-workers begin to laugh at them. Carl joins in.
3. Joe smokes pot regularly. He tells his girlfriend that he doesn't see anything wrong with doing something that makes him relax.

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