Conscience and Action

Teacher Background

The document *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council has this to say about moral conscience:

*Deep within their conscience a person discovers a law which they have not laid upon themselves but which they must obey. Its voice ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sound in the heart at the right moment…. For a person has in their heart a law inscribed by God…. Their conscience is a person's most secret core and sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.*

(*Gaudium et Spes 16*)

Moral conscience, then, is at the heart of the person. Conscience guides and provokes a person to do good and to avoid evil in a given context. Conscience and action are therefore closely connected. Conscience also judges the particular choices that a person makes providing approval of choices that are good and disapproval of choices for evil.

In order to be attentive to and to follow the voice of conscience, a person requires interiority, uprightness, prudent judgment and responsibility. Interiority requires the development of a reflective and prayerful disposition in order to truly hear the voice of conscience amid the many distractions of life. Uprightness challenges the person to consider and search out the truth and the good in particular moral situations taking account of principles of morality and their application in a given context. Prudent judgment involves applying the truth about the moral good in a given context. Conscience then, enables an individual to assume responsibility for the acts that he or she performs.

An individual has the right to act in conscience and in freedom to make personal moral decisions. A person is not to be forced to act contrary to the dictates of his or her conscience. It follows that conscience is to be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A conscience that is well formed is upright and truthful. The education of the conscience is indispensable and the task of a lifetime. Conscience formation for Christians entails not only consideration of facts and truth but includes prayer, reflection on the Word of God and the life and teaching of Christ and recourse to the moral teaching and guidance of the Church.

A human being must always obey the certain judgment of conscience. It can happen, however, that moral conscience makes erroneous judgments about how to act in particular circumstances. The degree of guilt and culpability that an individual bears for the erroneous judgments is dependent on a range of factors. Among such factors are the trouble taken by an individual to seek out what is true and good, the degree of good or bad influence from others, personal maturity and habitual sin creating a moral blindness. A further factor is rejection of the teaching and authority of Christ, his Gospel, the Church and other reputable moral guides. Even when an individual carries little or no personal guilt for the erroneous judgments of his or her conscience, the resulting evil remains no less an evil and a disorder. It is important then, to work to correct the errors of moral conscience.