Life Choices

Teacher Background

The Bible views the human person as a creature of God, as an animated body. Our bodiliness is the basis of our relationship with one another. Human existence is co-existence. Human existence is at once responsible, sinful and hope-filled. Modern theology focuses its attention on the consciousness of the human person, on the person’s freedom and responsibility, not only to co-create himself or herself, but to co-create the world and its history under God. The Second Vatican Council’s insistence on the importance of conscience, freedom and the innate desire for higher life reflects this modern shift in the Church’s thinking. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Vatican II (1965), states that only in freedom - not from blind internal impulse, nor from mere external pressure - can we direct ourselves towards goodness. But since our freedom has been damaged by sin, only with the help of God’s grace can we bring our relationship with God and thereby with the whole of creation to full flower (n. 17). Freedom enters into the very definition of what it means to be human. To be free is to be present to oneself, to be in possession of oneself, to be conscious of oneself as a distinct, responsible being. Freedom does not so much allow us to do something as to be someone. Such freedom is not absolute, however. Human freedom is limited from without and from within.

From without, our self-understanding and therefore our freedom, is shaped by our place in history and mediated through our experience e.g. what our parents tell us we are, what our friends and relatives and neighbours tell us, what society tells us, how our institutions, including the church, define us, what our economic and social status permits us to be.

From within, our freedom is qualified by the fact that we can never be fully present to ourselves. There is a psychic universe, described in different ways by various psychologists, which remains hidden from our consciousness and yet influences profoundly our awareness, our vision and our sense of personal responsibility.

Freedom is a transcendental capacity to orient ourselves beyond ourselves and to shape our entire life (not just to do this or avoid that categorical act) according to that self-consciousness of who we are in the presence of God. This is what contemporary moral theologians mean by the fundamental option for God and God’s dream. As fallible human beings, we will occasionally act against this fundamental choice for God. No single act by itself represents a cancelling of that choice unless it an act of sufficient depth and magnitude to constitute a fundamental repeal of the conversion experience. Such a mortal sin should be a rare occurrence for one committed to the values of the kingdom of God.

If we are not free, we are not responsible. And if we are not responsible, human existence is reduced to mechanical existence. Without freedom and responsibility there is no love, no faith, no hope, no trust, no compassion, no friendship, no justice. Everything is calculated, predetermined, subject only to accident and or miscalculation. (McBrien, 1994)

The Capacity for Sin

Deepening the relationships with God, neighbour, world and the self, as well as the virtues which direct these relationships, constitutes the growth and ongoing conversion of the Christian. Breaking or damaging those same relationships with God, neighbour, world and self, constitutes sin. Freedom is the capacity to say either “Yes” or “No” to God- that is, to see ourselves as either having ultimate worth because we live by a principle that transcends us, or to see ourselves as a product of biological responses and psychological and social conditioning. However, it is very difficult to be able to point
to a particular moment or act in our lives and say precisely here and not there that we made a fundamental and irrevocable choice for or against God. Whether our lives are oriented towards God or away from God can be judged only on the basis of the totality of our lives, not on the basis of totalling up virtuous acts and sinful acts and then figuring the difference. Although the church has always taught that we have the capacity to reject God fundamentally (mortal sin), it has never taught that there is, in fact, anyone who is “in hell”. Pope John Paul II has taught, however, that one individual act can change the fundamental option if it constitutes a fundamental repeal of the (transcendental) conversion experience. But the insights of both psychology and sociology have compelled contemporary Catholic moral theology to point out also that because we cannot be certain to what extent outside and inside forces have manipulated us, we can never be certain that we have finally and fully said “NO” to God, even in an act which appears on the surface to be of such a kind.

**Venial, Serious and Mortal Sin**

No human being is capable of being perfectly good all the time, nor absolutely evil all the time. *Venial* sin is a human act that is not fully consistent with our fundamental orientation toward God. In venial sin, there is a genuine decision to do a particular action, but there is no decision to become the sort of person who does that action all of the time. In every venial sin, there is a contradiction between the act and the person doing the act.

*Venial* sin admits degrees of seriousness. Some actions are objectively more serious violations of Gospel imperatives than others. Some circumstances make an attitude or deed more serious than others.

*Serious* sin is even more inconsistent with our fundamental orientation towards God’s kingdom than venial sin. Contemporary Catholic theology has differentiated between serious sin and mortal sin. *Mortal* sin is an act which fully engages the person. The person chooses not only the act (the categorical dimension), but also the kind of person he/she wants to become in and through the act (the transcendental dimension). This approach is different from an older view in moral theology that every serious sin is also a mortal sin. Missing Mass on the occasional Sunday without a good reason is a serious sin, but is different from deciding never to go to Mass again because one is now a person who has fundamentally rejected the notion of a God or a God who is approachable in prayer. The primary determinant of morality must be the motive, not the act itself. To be moral is to be true to oneself, to be seeking always to be the one who responds to the call of God and to act in ways consistent with that vocation. To be immoral is to refuse to be that kind of person (responding to the call of God) and therefore to refuse to act in ways consistent with that being.

**Conscience**

**What conscience is NOT:**
Conscience is not a feeling, whether good or bad. One can feel guilty about a whole range of things which have nothing to do with conscience. Similarly, the fact that one does not feel guilty about an issue does not make it right. Feelings are not indicative of moral rectitude or deficiency.

**What conscience IS:**
Conscience is the radical experience of *ourselves as moral agents*. Only when one decides to do, or not to do, something, is one acting out of conscience. Conscience is the radical experience of being *other Chirsts*—disciples—acting in his name to further the kingdom of God. But, as noted above, we can never know ourselves completely and so decisions of conscience are necessarily incomplete and partial. And because our own circumstances are always historically, socially and culturally defined, decisions of conscience are necessarily fallible and subject to correction and change.
Conscience is not infallible.
Conscience is the act of moral judgement. (Aquinas)
Conscience is what summons us to love good and avoid evil. (Vatican II)

There are three levels of Conscience:
1. an innate sense of the difference between good and evil - a human condition.
2. an act of judgement that something is morally good or evil, using as much information as is available.
3. a final norm, right or wrong, by which the person’s act must be guided, allowing us to be true to ourselves.

The primacy of the individual conscience is strongly rooted in Catholic theology and is now taken for granted.

We are bound to follow our conscience in all our activity and one should not be prevented from following even an erroneous conscience. (Vatican II)

The majority of this Teacher Background material is synthesised from a number of chapters in McBrien, R.P., (1994). Catholicism. North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove. At times it has been significantly simplified. For more detail, or if clarification is needed, the text itself should be consulted.