Personal Discernment and Action

Teacher Background

The call of the Pope for adults everywhere to develop “a high moral vision” requires the development of what Australian sociologist and philosopher Hugh Mackay has termed “moral mindfulness”. In Buddhism, “mindfulness” is understood as an understanding of what we are doing and saying. The art of “mindfulness” is acquired through meditation that explores, unveils and illuminates what is hidden within and around us. In his most recent book Right and Wrong (Hodder, 2004), Mackay discusses the notion of moral mindfulness and describes a number of basic “checks” we can use to evaluate our moral decisions and develop our own decision-making processes. He describes moral mindfulness as borrowing from the mindfulness of Buddhism and the Aristotelian concept of contemplation. When it comes to the practice of moral decision-making, he says, the synthesis of meditation and contemplation involves a threefold discipline:

- Being fully aware, moment by moment, of the ethical dimension of whatever you are doing;
- Taking into account what you have learned from previous experience in similar situations;
- Imagining what the consequences are likely to be, for all concerned.

Moral mindfulness is a habit of mind (or heart) that can be acquired by constant practice, fuelled by the desire to live a better life and to make the world a better place. To develop the art of moral mindfulness, one must care about the difference between right and wrong and be passionate in one’s determination to make sound moral decisions (p.74).

Mackay then describes a number of simple “tests” by which one can stimulate moral mindfulness. A number of these have been incorporated into the student activities which follow, to assist them to develop decision-making practices. They are described in fact cards within the activity.

Note:
The Teacher Background in the module which follows this, namely, Moral Integrity, (for levels 5-6) includes a discussion on freedom and conscience in more depth. What follows is a synthesis of those notes. Teachers are encouraged to refer to that module.

Freedom:

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)

Conscience
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 Christs-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)