Implementing the teaching of Vatican II on the Primary role of Conscience

Being Catholic and Christian means living by what we believe. But how do we know what God wants? How do we know right from wrong? How do we grow in our understanding of what constitutes a moral life?

These matters were on the minds of the Council Fathers at Vatican II. Before Vatican II, it was seen to be enough that Catholics simply and always followed the “law of the Church.” Certainly that law is just, and it is a guide for our souls.

But in modern times, not every decision we face is simple enough to be directed by Church law. How does one measure one’s response to the plight of the world’s poor, for example? The law can tell us that we must feed them, but how much of our own money must we contribute? When have we done enough and exhausted our duty?

Likewise, the law tells us, for example, that sexual activity inside of marriage is permitted. But within marriage, sexual activity can be manipulative. It can be coercive. It could even be rape! That it’s legal does not necessarily make it loving. This latter concern, that we allow love to govern our lives, was seen by the Council Fathers as the chief means to holiness (Church, #40).

Into this arena steps the role of conscience. It is the responsibility of pastoral leaders to assist all Catholics to form their consciences well. We must not assume that people can arrive at sound moral decisions without the help of the community of faith. But we must also not assume that simple laws will be enough. Other means are needed if we are to live as God wants.

From the Documents of Vatican II

“The human person sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law through conscience. All are bound to follow their conscience faithfully in every sphere of activity so that they may come to God, who is their last end. Therefore, the individual must not be forced to act against conscience nor be prevented from acting according to conscience, especially in religious matters (Religious Liberty, #3).
1. Each person has a conscience. We are bound to follow it closely throughout our lives.

2. Our conscience shows us the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which we are all drawn.

3. A well-developed conscience welcomes the ten commandments because it recognizes that they are drawn from the wisdom of God.

4. Every person must be present to him or herself in order to hear and follow the voice of conscience. This requires a certain level of self-awareness and self-reflection, as well as self-examination.

5. We can only be truly and fully human when we follow our conscience and live an upright life.

6. We are responsible for the acts we perform or fail to perform, in support of what is good and just.

7. Our conscience, when it prompts us to reflect on what we have done or failed to do, can help us detect where we have succeeded or failed in the moral life. It leads us to ask for forgiveness when we have been wrong, to allow our hearts to be filled with contrition. And it allows us to be grateful when we have chosen for the Good.

8. Conscience must be well-formed and enlightened. The education of the conscience is necessary for us all.

9. “In the formation of conscience, the Word of God is the light for our path. We must allow it to guide us. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the witness of others, and the teaching of the Church” (Catechism, #1785).

**How can the parish make this happen?**

It goes without saying that a chief element in parish life must be a program through which people are assisted in the formation of their consciences. The first step is to ask the adult faith formation group to tackle this as a part of their work. If no adult faith formation group exists, this is certainly the time to form one. This group must be careful not to merely insist upon obedience to church law, as though that were sufficient. As you can see from Principle #9 above, much more is needed.

**Why is this so important?**

Many good people have felt that the Catholic Church failed to respect decisions which they were reaching in good conscience. Likewise, pastors and pastoral leaders sometimes feel they must publicly require that people follow church law literally in all cases. There are some in the church who insist on this legal literalism, and often chastise those who disagree with them.

Indeed, the Catechism recognizes this tension. Building on the teaching of Vatican II, the Catechism says in article 1790 that we must always obey the certain judgment of our consciences.

Parishes serve their people well which provide forums in which good people can air their beliefs and clarify what is right and good.
Parish Forums to Help People Form their Consciences

Let’s talk together about the key matters of our day
In one parish, the pastor, team, and pastoral council have instituted a series of public events in which specific topics are examined. These events are called by a clever name: The Signs of the Times. (One person said they should have been called “The Sins of the Times!”) One person is chosen to be the Leader for each event. The format for these events has proven to be very successful.

Following Principle #9 above, the leader prepares each event around one topic of modern moral life. Recently, they held one that addressed how to decide how much money we can justly keep for our own use, and how much we must contribute to the needs of the poor and the upkeep of the common good through taxes. They chose this because people had asked for help in deciding how to make these tough decisions. Many other topics are also suitable.

Forum formats

Following a similar format in each session helped everyone trust the process
Each forum began with refreshments as people gathered. The opening moments were used for introductions and to focus the theme. The Leader was prepared to introduce the topic with a short presentation using PowerPoint. For this example, the topic was deciding how to manage our relative wealth as lucky citizens of a western nation. His opening statement drew from Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, the Catechism, and other sources.

After this introduction, people talked in small groups about their sense of this question and drew together a list of questions and concerns they hoped to resolve in their own minds and souls. Each small group presented this to the rest – and there were many identical questions and concerns raised among the groups.

This list of questions and concerns were then divided among the small groups, each group tackling one set of related issues. The task given to each group was threefold. First, state the principles a Catholic should consider when responding to these issues. Second, suggest a norm by which a Catholic could be reconciled to the demands of the gospel and the church community related to this issue. Third, suggest concrete actions a person could take in response.

These small group outcomes were then presented in the large group and the Leader facilitated a large group discussion about them.

As agreement emerged in the group about how a faithful Catholic should respond, the Leader moved the group to prayer. Using an Ignatian approach, the Leader invited each person present to take some quiet time and really listen to his or her own heart. Then in personal words of their own, each was invited to speak with God about this issue. These personal prayers were shared as the closing prayer of the event.

If we don’t help Catholics form their consciences, someone else in the culture will do it for us.
Mini-Courses as Adult Formation

Help people develop their consciences by helping them understand Catholic teaching.

GOOD ADULT PEDAGOGY IS THE SECRET TO THESE MINI-COURSES

How do adults learn? We know from our research that listening to long lectures, even when the topic is interesting, is not popular. We know that sending people home with a book to read works for only a tiny fraction of today’s adults. We know that using online learning centers serves a small number.

Adults want active learning, on topics that matter to them, in a context that allows them to question and discuss without fear of being judged.

Growing Faith Mini-Courses to the rescue! One parish (there were many to choose from for this example) offers one Mini-Course in the late autumn leading up to Advent, and another during Lent. The Mini-Courses meet in small groups. Large group process is also possible and in some parishes, they succeed with it. Whether in small groups or large ones, the format for each Mini-Course is similar:

- Opening prayer is based on the Question of the Week and faith sharing. See How to Lead Faith Sharing, a free resource on the web site.
- The study portion is organized around Learn & Teach. This is a method for teaching in which the learners divide the material into segments. Each segment is assigned to a small group. The learners must learn this segment well enough to turn around and teach it to their peers.
- After the learning portion is complete, members bring to prayer what they have done. These prayers are shared in the closing prayer.

This is active learning. Participation of all results in ownership by all. They are encouraged to discuss openly, but in the end to integrate Church teaching into their own. Here is a list of topics they have used:

- The Nature of God & Faith
- How do we Grow in our Faith?
- The Person of Jesus Christ
- The Nature of the Church
- Liturgy & Sacraments
- Catholic Social & Moral Teachings
- Living the Commandments
- Prayer and Praying

For more info, follow the links on the website.

In your Parish...

Questions you can ask

What do we do now as a parish to help adults and young adults develop their conscience and grow in their ability to truly listen to that inner voice of God in their depths?

Who emerges as a Leader in our parish to help us tackle this essential aspect of adult formation?

First steps

1. Create a plan for the coming year, including setting topics, leaders, and dates. 2. Consider a free will offering to help defray the modest costs for this. 3. Review the resource you will use.

Will you share your story?

Tell us what you’re doing that’s working. We’ll share it with others. Send notes to us at the eMail address on the website.